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**SOCIAL MEDIA INFLUENCERS IN  
DESTINATION MARKETING**  
A Case Study of Visit Tampere, Finland

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OLGA JAVITS: Social media influencers in destination marketing. A Case Study of Visit

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## **Abstract**

Tourism products are difficult to assess prior to their purchase, and consumers tend to rely on word-of-mouth recommendations before making a travel decision. When choosing a destination, travelers trust peer recommendations and user-generated content, rating it higher than traditional advertising. This makes online influencer marketing a strategically important tool for destination marketers. In order to reach their target demographics and secure an authentic presence in niche communities, destinations should allocate an important role to this form of marketing and integrate it into their marketing strategies.

The topic of influencer marketing has been receiving increasing academic consideration. Nevertheless, studies focused on this form of marketing in destination promotion are still scarce. Research demonstrates a gap in how destinations implement influencer marketing to support their strategic marketing objectives, how they identify a suitable influencer and gauge the effectiveness of their influencer collaborations, as well as the role of a manager throughout the whole process of place marketing via influencers. Understanding these processes is crucial for destination marketers in order to obtain results with their influencer activities and generate a better return on investments.

The thesis relies on a case study and employs such qualitative methods as semi-structured interviews, participant observation, and content observation. The interviews with the studied company's marketing managers are used as a primary source of data for addressing the research questions, and their results are compared and contrasted against the results of the observation.

The study uncovers the reasons behind the DMO integrating influencer marketing into its marketing strategy and demonstrates how this tool supports the marketing objectives of the destination. It also sheds light on the measurement approaches that the DMO applies to its influencer collaborations and suggests more trackable targets than awareness of the destination. The empirical study also advances the understanding of the strategic role of a manager of influencer marketing activities in destination marketing and argues that a manager's input into each collaboration is an essential prerequisite for successful results. In addition, it generates insights into how the DMO could shape its influencer marketing activities into a more strategic process.

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**Keywords:** influencer marketing, destination marketing, social media, strategic marketing, media management, strategic management.

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The originality of this thesis has been checked using the Turnitin OriginalityCheck service.

## Table of Contents

<b>Introduction.....</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>1. LITERATURE REVIEW.....</b>	<b>3</b>
1.1. WOM and eWOM.....	4
1.2. WOM and eWOM in tourism.....	5
1.3. Destination marketing .....	7
1.4. eWOM-marketing in destination marketing.....	9
1.4.1. Social media in destination marketing.....	9
1.4.2. Blogs in tourism promotion .....	11
1.5. Online influencer marketing.....	13
1.5.1. Social media influencers as a destination marketing tool.....	16
1.5.2. Identifying the influencer and measuring the results.....	18
1.6. Approaches to strategies and strategic management.....	20
<b>2. RESEARCH DESIGN .....</b>	<b>27</b>
2.1. Research questions.....	27
2.2. Data collection methods.....	31
2.2.1. Semi-structured interviews .....	32
2.2.2. Participant observation.....	33
2.3. Sampling and empirical data collection .....	33
2.3.1. Case selection.....	34
2.3.2. Content observation .....	34
2.4. Case company.....	35
2.4.1. Visit Tampere: mission and customer promise.....	35
2.4.2. Organizational structure.....	37
<b>3. FINDINGS .....</b>	<b>38</b>
3.1. Influencers as part of the marketing strategy .....	39
3.1.1. Increasing awareness.....	39
3.1.2. From paid advertising to influencer marketing.....	42
3.1.3. Reasons for influencer marketing .....	46
3.1.4. Finding a suitable influencer.....	48
3.1.5. Strategic messages and target markets.....	53
a) Sauna capital of the world.....	56

b) Nature.....	57
c) The world’s only Moomin Museum .....	64
d) Making Finland #HungryForTampere .....	65
3.1.6. Conclusions.....	67
<b>3.2. Measuring the results.....</b>	<b>68</b>
<b>3.3. Managing influencer marketing .....</b>	<b>72</b>
3.3.1. Selecting suitable influencers.....	73
3.3.2. Being the contact person at the destination.....	74
3.3.3. Defining priorities and deliverables .....	75
3.3.4. Creating value for the influencer .....	77
3.3.5. Providing a positive interaction experience .....	78
<b>3.4. Conclusions .....</b>	<b>80</b>
<b>3.5. Discussion: towards more strategic influencer marketing .....</b>	<b>81</b>
<b>4. LIMITATIONS AND FURTHER RESEARCH.....</b>	<b>83</b>
<b>References .....</b>	<b>86</b>
<b>Appendix .....</b>	<b>99</b>

## Figures and Tables

### Figures

Figure 1: Targeting and positioning strategy .....	24
Figure 2: Porter's components of a digital marketing strategy .....	26
Figure 3: Organizational structure of the DMO .....	37
Figure 4: Post by @alex.mazurov on Instagram on January 11, 2016 .....	44
Figure 5: Post by @anastasia.shuraeva on Instagram on January 9, 2016 .....	45
Figure 6: Post by @mikhailovim on Instagram on January 10, 2016.....	45
Figure 7: Forms of finding influencers at the DMO .....	49
Figure 8: The DMO's influencer collaborations in 2018 by channels.....	53
Figure 9: Geography of influencers collaborations in 2018 .....	54
Figure 10: Main themes of influencer collaboartions at the DMO in 2018.....	55
Figure 11: Tampere's sauna culture featured in the Wired magazine .....	57
Figure 12: Post in Kaukokaipuu blog .....	59
Figure 13: Post in Aamukahvilla blog .....	59
Figure 14: Post by @asasteinars on November 28, 2018 .....	62
Figure 15: Post by @photo_shapiev on November 29, 2018 .....	63
Figure 16: Post by @care4art on November 26, 2018.....	63
Figure 17: The measurement criteria applied by the DMO .....	72
Figure 18: Post by @anastasia.shuraeva on Instagram.....	78

### Tables

Table 1: Mintzberg's ten schools of strategy .....	23
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## Introduction

Today, due to the rapid advance of globalization, countries, regions, and cities compete for their share of the world's tourists, investors, talents, cultural, sporting events, and for the attention of the international media. In this global market of destinations, cities act as brands, building and sustaining their competitive identity, communicating and selling their messages to consumers. These efforts constitute a complex of communication and marketing strategies developed and managed by destination marketing organizations, or DMOs.

The Internet has profoundly transformed how travelers access information, plan and book trips, and share their travel experiences (Hays, Page, & Buhalis, 2013; Law, Qi, & Buhalis, 2010). The development of an economy revolving around social media, review sites and travel blogs has made it easier for tourists to obtain information and make trip decisions. The increase of online diaries, or blogs, has affected not only communication channels, but also the way tourism destinations are being promoted and consumed (Banyai & Glover, 2012).

A tourism product is an experience product that consists of services and products which are hard to assess before their purchase (McIntosh, 1972 – as cited in Pan, McLaurin & Crotts, 2007). Therefore, consumers have to rely on impressions of other travelers' experiences. Advice from other consumers who have prior experience with a particular tourism product and who are interpersonally available is ranked as the most influential in travel decision making (Crotts 1999). Given the ever-increasing number of travel blogs and social media accounts expressing the experiences of the visitor at a specific destination, digital word-of-mouth communications have become more preferred as travel information source than destinations' official online communication resources (Fili & Krizaj, 2016; Királ'ová & Pavlíčka, 2015; Litvin, Goldsmith, & Pan, 2008). For marketers, this represents numerous challenges and opportunities at the same time. In response to both, destinations embraced the recently emerged tool of **influencer marketing**.

Due to its perceived authenticity by consumers, influencer marketing is considered to be an effective marketing method for reaching essential target groups and influencing their attitudes and purchasing behavior. The key element of influencer marketing is to find suitable influ-

encers who share the company's values and intermediate genuinely exciting content for the company's target groups.

An influencer can be defined as a content producer using social media or any individual with a follower demographics relevant for a specific advertiser, who is willing to sell their audiences for marketing purposes (PING Helsinki, 2016). Brands pay influencers for their time, creativity, the work they invest in creating their content, and access to the audience the influencer has worked hard to build (Sammis, 2017). Influencers can keep a blog or post their opinions on YouTube, Snapchat, Instagram or other social media platforms. They can be athletes, artists, van travelers or people of any other occupation, but the essential elements they share are their community in social media and a willingness to produce and share material for their followers.

With the help of influencers, companies can obtain better results than with many other marketing methods. Professional travel and lifestyle bloggers, vloggers, and social media users with a substantial following and engaged audiences offer brands value through authentic coverage and access to niche communities.

Destinations globally have realized the benefits of collaboration with social media influencers (Peltier, 2018). However, this is still an evolving marketing tool, and many marketers are yet to discover an efficient model for such collaboration. Some DMOs have embraced the opportunities of influencer marketing to the extent of incorporating it into their marketing and communications strategies (Bonilla, 2018), whereas other tourism boards still allocate only tiny budgets for procuring the services of online opinion leaders.

The objective of this qualitative case study is to examine how DMOs implement influencer marketing to promote their destinations online and differentiate them in the market of places. More specifically, this study is built around questions of influencer marketing being part of the marketing strategy of a DMO, supporting marketing objectives of a destination and key strategic messages, as well as the measurement of results. The author also aims at defining the role of a manager in such collaborations and generating managerial insights about the use of influencers as a strategic asset for destination promotion.



Integrating influencer marketing into their marketing strategy is of paramount importance. The intangible nature of destinations as products makes user-generated content often the most trusted source of information for consumers of tourism products and services (Confente, 2015; Hernández-Méndez, Muñoz-Leiva, & Sánchez-Fernández, 2015). Therefore, tourism marketers should base their online communication activities on managing this content.

Identifying the right influencer is a crucial question for marketers in influencer promotion in all industries. Both researchers and practitioners apply different criteria to estimate the influence of opinion leaders.

Measuring the results of influencer collaborations is another challenge that DMOs face when dealing with influencer marketing. This is in part due to the nature of social media advertising: the number of followers, page views, and likes are not necessarily associated with a purchase decision. Influencer marketing can not be easily quantified (Sammis, 2017). In addition, unlike other brands, destinations do not tend to sell anything directly via influencers; hence they should use different measurement criteria than those companies that engage with influencers to sell a service or product.

Social media influencers are not simply marketing tools, but rather social relationship assets with whom brands can collaborate to achieve their marketing objectives (Olenski, 2017). They also should be seen as strategic partners by marketers (Barker, 2018), and the role of the manager in building this partnership is particularly high. Academic literature, however, reveals a gap in research into the managerial perspective on influencer marketing in general and in relation to destination marketing in particular. This study aims to uncover the role of an influencer marketing manager at a DMO and address the key functions of this manager that may predetermine the successful outcome of influencer campaigns.

## **1. Literature Review**

The Internet has changed the way we make travel decisions. Along with the evolution from Web 1.0. to Web 2.0. in recent years, the new Travel 2.0. model appeared (Hernández-Méndez et al., 2015) allowing users to exchange information on their travel experiences. Users can experience a destination before going there by watching others' videos, reading blogs, asking questions on forums. User-generated content platforms have created a new recommen-

dation culture that has a significant impact on the tourism industry due to its high influence on travel decision making (Lozano, 2011). Destination marketing organizations have learned to take advantage of the influencing nature of online word-of-mouth and integrate it into their marketing and communication strategies in order to attract more tourists.

This chapter will review recent literature on such essential concepts for the study as word-of-mouth (WOM) and electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM), provide definitions for destination marketing and destination marketing organizations (DMOs), as well as uncover the most common practices of employing different user-generated content (UGC) platforms by DMOs.

## **1.1. WOM and eWOM**

Research on word-of-mouth (WOM) date back to the 1960's, and its definitions have evolved since then (Carl, 2006). Over half of century ago, Arndt (1967) defined WOM as an interpersonal communication regarding a brand, product or service perceived by the receiver as non-commercial. Engel, Kegerreis, & Blackwell (1969) described WOM-information as an “indispensable experienced source created by individuals or marketers and diffused by consumers or marketers to other consumers”. Bone (1992) characterized WOM as a group phenomenon in which consumers act as non-professional sources of information for other consumers.

In the digital area, WOM has taken the form of publicly accessible online content (reviews, recommendations, comments) disseminated across various social media platforms (forums, websites, blogs, and social networks) and that enable a consumer to conveniently obtain information from different sources. These online interpersonal recommendations are referred to as electronic WOM (eWOM) that transmit the information in text, graphic, audio and video format (e.g. podcasts and vlogs) and reach vast numbers of Internet users globally. eWOM has been addressed as the most influential information source for a consumer when making a purchase decision (Litvin et al., 2008; Prendergast, Ko, & Yuen, 2010).

As compared to WOM, eWOM holds some dimensional differences that go beyond the communication medium. Tham, Croy, & Mair (2013) formulated the following five characteristics of eWOM that make it different from WOM: little known source-receiver relationships, channel variety and presentation of contents, more opportunities for information solicitation,

greater message retention and searchability, and, finally, content provider motivation for disclosure. These characteristics are significant enough to approach eWOM as a different entity to WOM. Therefore, the study will separate these two terms and address WOM as a generic term whenever specification of the medium for WOM communication is not relevant. Another reason for keeping these two concepts distinct is the subject of the research which is marketing practices that employ online word-of-mouth (eWOM) communication tools, such as blogs and social networks.

## **1.2. WOM and eWOM in tourism**

Consumers see WOM as a more credible source of information in comparison to marketer-created online resources (Fong & Burton, 2008). Internet users exchange their opinions, ideas and comments regarding products, share their reviews of purchased goods, and with these reviews, direct fellow users either towards or away from buying a specific service or product (Hawkins, Best, & Coney, 2004).

According to a more recent study conducted by the global research company Nielsen, 92% of global consumers say they trust WOM above all other forms of advertising and 79% of consumers worldwide prefer online consumer reviews as the second most trusted source of information before making a purchase decision (Grimes, 2012). Over 60 percent of US travelers rely on social media platforms like Facebook and Instagram when deciding on their next travel destination (Peltier, 2018).

WOM is especially important in the hospitality and tourism industry, whose products are difficult to evaluate without direct experience of them. The influence of WOM on the tourism industry has proved to be especially high due to the intangible nature of tourism products (Fernández-Cavia, Marchiori, Haven-Tang, & Cantoni, 2017; Gon, Pechlaner, & Marangon, 2016; Gretzel, Yoo & Purifoy, 2007; Litvin et al., 2008). Purchasing tourism products is associated with higher risk which results in consumers relying on interpersonal recommendations, which mitigate the perceived risk of product purchasing. (Hernández-Méndez et al., 2015).

WOM in the tourism industry has been addressed in many major tourism and hospitality journals for at least the past 32 years, the earliest found study on WOM in tourism having appeared in a tourism journal in 1987, and research on the topic has been steadily increasing since then (Confente, 2015).

Scholars have been widely addressing the interrelation between eWOM and travel decisions, and the influence of eWOM on the purchasing of tourism products (Patterson, 2007; Black & Kelley, 2009; Mauri & Minazzi, 2013 – as cited in Confente 2015).

Travelers access information on destinations and tourism products, plan for and book their trips, as well as share their travel experiences online (Confente 2015). Social media, review sites and travel blogs have made it easier to obtain tourism information and to make travel decisions.

Studies have found that over 20% of consumers rely on social media and blogs when planning their trips. (Sarks, 2007). A study with users of Tripadvisor.com proved that the most popular online activities carried out during the trip planning phase included looking at other tourists' comments and materials, and reading travel blogs (Gretzel et al. 2007). A recent study in Finland (Dagmar, 2017) proved that every third Internet user searches for information published via blogs before making travel decisions, and the purchase decisions of every sixth Internet user are influenced by information published via blogs.

The primary reason for this phenomenon is the higher perceived credibility of consumer opinions as compared to traditional tourist information sources or paid advertising. The age group which travels the most, millennials, (Schawbel, 2015) count on social media and blogs as the most reliable source of information before making a purchase decision: 33% of this age group trust blogs, in comparison to fewer than 3% who rank magazines, TV news, and books more highly (Elite Daily, 2015) Millennials value authenticity over content when consuming news, and stories shared via social media by other users are meant to be authentic (Elite Daily, 2015). The authors of user-generated content are most often single individuals who are easy to perceive as peers, or even as friends.

Risk reduction and social reassurances are two of the factors which most motivate consumers to look for eWOM before making their travel decision (Kim, Mattila, & Baloglu, 2011). In an

environment where consumers' intention is to minimize risk is accompanied by a reduction in consumer trust in paid advertising (Jalilvand & Samiei, 2012), online interpersonal influence offers organizations in the tourism and hospitality industry a way to obtain a significant competitive advantage.

Given its powerful influence over consumption choices, eWOM is seen as a vital part of an overall marketing strategy for businesses operating within hospitality and tourism (Litvin, Goldsmith & Pan, 2006). It is a cost-effective means of promoting tourism products, and tourism and hospitality marketers should seek to systematically harness these consumer interactions to their own advantage.

A significant lack of literature related to implementation of the strategies for online interpersonal influence in the industry indicated by researchers a decade ago (Litvin, Goldsmith & Pan, 2006) demonstrates that tourism and hospitality organizations have been quite slow to realize the importance of a strategic approach to influencer marketing. One of the following sections of the literature review will look in more detail into some of the recent practices of eWOM marketing designed by destination marketing organizations.

### **1.3. Destination marketing**

Destinations are referred to as the biggest brands in the travel industry (Morgan, Pritchard, & Piggott, 2003). According to one of the early definitions (Leiper, 1979), a destination is a place people travel to temporarily from the region they reside in, "creating a tourism flow in both time and space" (Pike & Page 2013). Traveling to a place always has an aspect of temporality in it, unlike residing in a place, so the definition of destination can be narrowed down to a *place people travel to from their domiciles*. Travelers to a specific destination can therefore be referred to as consumers of this destination.

With the growth of competition in the travel market, destinations have to position themselves in order to appeal to their target audiences and stand out from the crowd of competitors (Pike & Page, 2014). Regional and national tourism boards focus their activities on improving the attractiveness of the destination and positioning it in the market place. The marketing activities and strategies they design and implement, both domestically and internationally, are cru-

cial for the destination's competitiveness. The success of the outcome, however, will depend on many factors, such as a good marketing plan and promotion of specific products and services (Pike & Page, 2014).

The first destination marketing practices date back to the 16th century in France where the first travel guides were printed (Sigaux, 1966 – as cited in Pike & Page, 2014). Regional destination promotion agencies started appearing in the second half of 19th century and the first national tourism office was launched in 1901 in New Zealand (McClure, 2004 – as cited in Pike & Page, 2014). The number of destination marketing organizations increased significantly in the second half of the 20th century with the rise of package holidays and the introduction of air travel. Nowadays, the amount of DMOs globally is estimated to be around 10000 (Pike & Page, 2014).

Summarizing an academic literature review on the roles and functions of DMOs, Wang (2008) states them to be:

- destination marketers,
- destination image developers,
- destination promotion coordinators,
- advocates,
- and supporters.

DMOs are playing important roles by “acting as organizers and facilitators for tourism marketing and development of the destination” (Wang, 2008). Scholars agree that the primary focus of DMOs is on marketing and sales of the attractions, events, and products offered by a destination (Wang, 2008).

Promotional activities initiated by destinations in order to attract visitors are now ubiquitous, and the technological advantages of the digital era have facilitated their presence on different digital platforms: social networks, mobile applications, outdoor screens with tourist information, and others.

The design and implementation of marketing communication strategies that match the market opportunities with what the destination offers in order to attract visitors is at the core of DMOs' activities (Pike & Page, 2014). Their operations are usually focused on enhancing destination competitiveness and the visibility of tourism businesses. DMOs identify resources that help the area they promote stand out from the competitors with similar offerings – at the regional, national and global levels.

Destination marketing is entwined with destination branding; however, these two processes hold differences at their cores. As practitioners describe the difference between them, “destination branding is about who you are and destination marketing is about how you communicate who you are” (The Place Brand Observer, 2015). The focus of the destination branding process is on the identification of the destination’s strongest assets, which constitute its competitive advantage for potential visitors, wrapping these into a story, and narrating this story consistently throughout marketing communications. In other words, destination branding's main activities are associated with formulating key messages and communicating these to the target audiences.

The final goal of these branding activities is to increase the number of prospective visitors. Therefore, destination branding is a set of marketing activities aimed at creating a destination image that influences consumer travel decision in favor of the destination. As it follows from the definitions provided above, marketing is an integral part of destination branding, and the destination brand, in its turn, is an essential part of destination marketing. DMOs' activities often merge these two practices in their tactical and strategic marketing activities.

#### **1.4. eWOM-marketing in destination marketing**

eWOM marketing is a "new marketing method that uses electronic communications (e.g., blogosphere, forum, email) to spread messages throughout a widespread network of potential customers" (Li, Lai, & Chen, 2011). The network effect is an important factor in measuring the real value of a customer, as in traditional marketing. By reaching out to potential customers and their networks, this method seeks to attract more attention from target audiences. eWOM marketing has gained recognition “as a crucial strategy in social influence and marketing domains” (Li et al., 2011).

Social media have accumulated one of the most significant shares of online word-of-mouth and have become a crucial source for tourism information (Uşaklı, Koç, & Sönmez, 2017) and a great promotional tool for marketing of tourism products (Kiráľová & Pavlíčka, 2015).

Destinations worldwide, from smaller villages to whole countries, are present with their accounts on different social media platforms in order to reach out to potential customers there where they are. This part of the chapter will be focused on social media and blogs in particular as the most efficient platforms for eWOM marketing in relation to destination marketing.

#### **1.4.1. Social media in destination marketing**

About 40% of the global population actively use social media and rely on them in their decision-making (Influencer Marketing Hub, 2018 a). Social media allow destinations to contact potential visitors at low cost and higher levels of efficiency than more traditional communication tools and advertising methods (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). Thanks to this cost-efficiency, the global coverage of social media networks and their ability to reach target demographics, destinations have been increasingly integrating social media into their marketing activities.

Visitors have no trust in direct advertising focused on the advantages of the destinations. Instead, they require a personal approach: interactive communication including empathy and expressions of emotion (Kiráľová, Pavlíčka, 2015). Social media offer destinations an excellent opportunity to stay competitive by creating appealing content and stimulating interactions with users. A communication strategy with a focus on social media is paramount for differentiation in the tourism market (Kiráľová & Pavlíčka, 2015).

In 2008, Portland, Oregon became the first destination in the world to launch the DMO Twitter. European destinations started being present in social media in 2005 when Austria launched its account on Youtube (Uşaklı et al., 2017). Nowadays, the majority of the countries of Europe have official accounts on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and Youtube. Studies indicate that destinations use social media channels mostly for promotion, treating them as traditional marketing tools (Uşaklı et al., 2017).



The use of social media marketing by DMOs is still evolving as the use of social media by travelers and tourism businesses continues to expand (Sigala et al, 2012). DMOs are in various stages of engagement with promoting destinations via social media platforms. In 2011, a study on the presence of European national DMOs revealed that few were fully using the potential of social media marketing (Hamill et al., 2012). While 21 of 25 DMOs were present on Facebook and Twitter, the level of their engagement was very low, “ranging from 0 to 48 out of a possible score of 75” (Bokunewicz & Shulman, 2017).

#### **1.4.2. Blogs in tourism promotion**

Researchers distinguish the following categories of social media: blogs, social networks, content communities, forums and content aggregators (Gretzel & Yoo, 2014), as well as reviews, micro-blogs and photo sharing sites (Királ'ová & Pavlíčka, 2015). Among these blogs stand out as the most influential source of information for consumers when it comes to travel decision making (Li et al., 2011).

All these platforms may be grouped into three domains: networking, sharing and gaming (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010), with blogs found in the domain of sharing and networking since they allow for the sharing of content and interacting with others via posting comments and giving and receiving feedback on the blog's contents (Királ'ová & Pavlíčka, 2015).

Being a huge word-of-mouth engine, the blogosphere has developed into a “good platform for advertisers to promote new products or services and for customers to locate product comments and purchasing suggestions” (Li et al., 2011). In the tourism sector, blogs are not only an essential mechanism for information exchanging among travelers, but also for destinations to gain knowledge about the attitudes of their target markets (Wenger, 2008).

A vast majority of travel-related blogs on the Internet belong to the consumer-to-consumer category (Schmallegger & Carson, 2008). User-generated blogs can be either stand-alone blogs on personal websites or hosted by public travel blog sites. They appear most often in a form of a travel diary where travelers share their stories about personal experiences with destinations, and share videos and photos.

Researchers agree that user-generated blogs are an important mechanism for destination marketers to learn about the attitudes of their target markets towards their destination (Banyai & Glover, 2012; Pan, MacLaurin, & Crotts, 2007; Schmallegger & Carson, 2008; Tussyadiah & Fesenmaier, 2008; Wenger, 2008). They address these blogs as a primary source of information for DMOs about consumers' experiences with the destination that provide marketers with valuable insights on how the destination is perceived. Blogs are also seen by scholars as a good tool for destination marketing strategists who can respond to feedback by improving customers' experiences and better meeting tourists' expectations (Banyai, 2012) and even by basing their marketing activities on the perceptions of blog users (Banyai, 2012; Schmallegger & Carson, 2008).

The constraint-free nature of feedback travelers leave on their blogs provides DMOs with information about their perceptions and impressions of the destination (McCabe and Foster 2006), as well as keep destination marketers updated about customer satisfaction with the services, products and experiences the destination has to offer.

Due to their independent nature and the expressed opinions being perceived as authentic, blogs create new possibilities for destination marketing. Travel blogs communicate first-hand experiences of tourists of a specific destination and its tourism products. They provide more detailed information, more visual material, and more discussions than, for example, social media posts do, and play a crucial role in the overall image of the destination as well as helping consumers reduce their doubts about traveling to a specific place (Çakmak & Isaac, 2012).

All this makes blogs a perfect platform for DMOs to market their destination and generate positive eWOM about its offerings. It has become a trend for DMOs to invite visitors to experience the destination and post about their impressions in order to attract more visitors (Banyai & Glover, 2012). The practices of cooperation of DMOs and travel bloggers are not emerging. For example, Visit Britain started collaborating with travel blogs about six years ago and has successfully implemented this into its marketing strategy since then (Khlat, 2015). Schmallegger et al (2008) describe a strategy of sponsoring professional bloggers to write about their travel experiences as successful.

## 1.5. Online influencer marketing

The practice of collaborating with bloggers described above falls into the domain of online influencer marketing. An online influencer is an individual who has accumulated a significant audience in a particular niche on an online platform and obtained the power to affect the purchase decisions of this audience due to his or her expertise, position or relationship with that audience (Influencer Marketing Hub, 2018 a). Such influencers are paid by brands in order that the brands gain access to the influencer's audiences to promote their product to them (Kádeková & Holienčinová, 2018). These collaborations are most commonly implemented in a form of providing free products or services, trips, discounts, special treatments, entrance tickets and other benefits or payments per promotional posts or a mention. These sponsored collaborations of brands with influencers have been dubbed influencer marketing.

The Dictionary of Social Media defines influencer marketing as a “strategy of promoting brands, products, or services with selected individuals who are judged most likely to exercise a significant influence on purchase decisions within a particular target market” (Chandler, D., & Munday, 2016). Though similar to eWOM marketing this method is not necessarily based on explicit recommendations. Simply a geotag or a hashtag under a picture posted by an influencer on Instagram, for instance, may generate influence for the brand behind these tags.

Influencer marketing is estimated to have been established as a recognizable practice for about five years ago (Peltier, 2018) and it has been increasingly considered as a cost-effective way for marketers to reach their target audiences and promote their products and services to them. Influencer marketing activities generate outstanding return on investment (ROI) (Kádeková & Holienčinová, 2018), triggering up to 11 times more than other forms of advertising (Chatzigeorgiou, 2017). Influencer marketing is also one of the fastest and easiest means of finding new customers online. By the year 2020, overall global investments in influencer marketing activities is estimated to reach 5-10 milliard dollars (Business Insider Intelligence, 2018).

Online influencers mediate online messages and affect communities in the digital environment, where messages can be disseminated rapidly and easily with a potential viral effect (Uzunoğlu & Misci Kip, 2014). The dissemination of messages is easy due to the similarity of interests of the influencer and the communities of users they affect. Brands seek to get an au-

thentic presence in these communities, but it's difficult for them to shape a conversation in this consumer-to-consumer communication environment. They look for someone to tell their story naturally, in a manner that would appeal to their potential customers. By engaging with influencers as mediators they can secure a trustworthy position among their target audiences (Uzunoğlu & Misci Kip, 2014).

The mechanisms of online influencing are similar to those of social influence – a process when individuals can change their opinions and decisions as the result of interaction with others who share similar interests with them (Li, Lee, & Lien, 2012).

With the development of the Internet, social networking sites and online communities, this influence has shifted from celebrities and experts as the original influencers (Kádeková & Holienčinová, 2018) to social media where anyone can become an influencer (Chatzigeorgiou, 2017) through developing a significant following and adding value to their social network. In the digital environment, celebrities and industry experts still remain influential provided they have a high level of presence on social networks and are willing to monetize it in the form of sponsored content.

Some online influencers who became known in social media networks may have equally large follower bases than celebrities and appear even more influential. Chinese researches define social media influencers as “Internet celebrities” (Xu & Pratt, 2018) who are opinion leaders shaping people's attitudes. They craft their personal brand and establish their celebrity value through authentic content, high engagement, connectedness and a solid following. They share similar qualities with traditional celebrities due to their high level of social presence and an ability to influence their audiences. Similar to mainstream celebrities, these Internet celebrities may then be used by marketers as promotion channels for their products. Influencer marketing is therefore based on the same principles as celebrity endorsement, defined as an agreement between a celebrity and a brand to use the former for the purpose of promoting the latter (Xu & Pratt, 2018).

Scholars and practitioners provide varying classifications of influencers. Kádeková & Holienčinová (2018) argue that the majority of online influencers fit into the following categories: celebrities, industry experts and thought leaders, bloggers or content creators, and micro-influencers, with micro-influencers and bloggers holding a predominant position.

A Finnish influencer agency PING Helsinki which established the biggest influencer festival in the Nordic Countries define influencers broader: “They can be [...] basically anything”, but it is essential that they a) have their own community in social media with the demographics of their audiences relevant to a specific marketer b) are willing to share with them high-quality content on a regular basis and c) are ready to sell their audiences for advertising purposes (PING Helsinki, 2016). They can also be content creators in social media platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, Youtube, Snapchat or have their podcasts on Spotify. Brands pay influencers for their time, creativity and the work they invest into content creation, and for access to their audience (Sammis, 2017).

Influencers are often categorized according to the number of their followers. Practitioners subdivide influencers into “macro-influencers” with a follower base numbering hundreds of thousands upwards, “micro-influencers” with a following in the tens of thousands or less and “nano-influencers”, who have only about a thousand followers (Anderson, 2018). The Definitive Guide to Influencer Marketing (2018) establishes yet another category, mega-influencers, with audiences of over 1 million.

There are also distinguished niche influencers that are focused on particular topics (Gretzel, 2018) like games, parenthood, wellness, food, entrepreneurship, etc. They are sometimes separated from micro-influencers, who are not necessarily driven with monetary rewards, whereas niche-influencers always are (Gretzel, 2018). These influencer types are also seen as synonyms, because micro-influencers have niche audiences to whom they are deeply connected (Wissman, 2018). Wissman (2018) also argues that micro-influencers are those who have already established the audience a brand looks for and earned the trust of this brand.

The most important platforms on which companies employ influencer marketing are: 1. Instagram (used by 89% of marketers engaged in influencer marketing); 2. Facebook and Twitter (both used by 70% of marketers); 3. Youtube (59%); 4. Blogs (48%); 5. Snapchat (45% of marketers) (Krasniak, 2016).

In comparison to posts on other social media, blogs are perceived as a more valuable tool for brands since blog content stays permanently on the web (Uzunoglu & Misci Kip, 2014). This influence blogs have can be multiplied by sharing the blog content on other social media

channels. Bloggers who are active on social networks are perceived as more valuable for brands (Kádeková & Holienčinová, 2018; Uzunoğlu & Misci Kip, 2014). This observation marks a shift from the “content is king” paradigm to “sharing is king.”

Besides being a crucial tool for maximizing the communicational impact of influencer marketing (Kádeková & Holienčinová, 2018), social media is the actual environment where the influence happens and where influencers appear. Instagram, for example, is known as a platform where a user with good, engaging content has an opportunity to build a blog and attract followers around a specific topic – traveling, gastronomy, wellness, etc. – and monetize their following by either promoting their products and services to the audience or by collaborating with brands.

### **1.5.1. Social media influencers as a destination marketing tool**

Influencer marketing can be implemented in the form of, for instance, blog posts, videos or pictures on the influencer’s social media channels (content cooperation) or the company’s online resources (content providing) (PING Helsinki, 2018). Tactics used in the collaboration of brands and influencers go beyond product endorsement and can include product reviews, links, affiliations, mentions, social media account takeovers, long-term ambassadorship, coupon codes, prizes and giveaways, events promotion, involvement into product development, familiarization trips, sponsored blog posts, and others (West, 2018).

Influencer marketing is a relatively young method, but it is already an established part of travel brands’ marketing strategies worldwide. The tourism industry is nowadays the eighth biggest spender on influencer marketing in the world (Peltier, 2018).

Influencer marketing represents a crucial tool for destinations to generate positive eWOM around their offerings and increase visit intentions in the target demographics. This is partly due to the fact that the age group which travels most – millennials, or Generation Y – (Schawbel, 2015) is a group whose consumption decisions are strongly affected by social media influencers (Xu & Pratt, 2018). This generation has the largest purchasing power (Chatzigeorgiou, 2017) and is expected to make 320 million international trips by 2020 (Xu & Pratt, 2018). These are the reasons why destination marketers are advised to engage more

with social media influencers in order to promote their destinations and achieve better audience interaction (Xu & Pratt, 2018).

Travel marketers have recognized the potential of message amplification and targeting allowed by social media influencers (Gretzel, 2018). Recent practices of influencer endorsement in the sector demonstrate the high extent of influencer marketing implementation. For example, the California-based Matador Network media company which focuses on travel has performed 150 influencer campaigns in the past five years (Peltier, 2018).

Influencer marketing has been a part of Australia's overall marketing strategy. Tourism Australia works with a network of more than 200 digital influencers through its Friends of Australia program (Peltier, 2018). Visit California went further and launched the first Digital Influencer Advisory Board to continuously enhance its influencer strategy, set guidelines for measuring return on investments, and developed long-term partnerships when working with influencers (Bonilla, 2018).

Previous academic research has examined influencers' endorsement in destination marketing. Xu & Pratt (2018) studied the effectiveness of choosing social media influencers as endorsers to promote travel destinations to the Chinese Generation Y. They investigated the impact of congruence between social media influencer endorsers and Chinese Generation Y consumers on their behavior intention, as well as determined the possible factors that influence the endorsement effectiveness for destination marketing.

The study also determined an interrelation between a consumer's travel decision making and a perceived image of an influencer: when there is a higher level of similarity between the consumer's ideal self-image and the image of the influencer, the consumer is prone to demonstrate greater visit intention toward the endorsed destination (Xu & Pratt, 2018). DMOs, therefore, should pay close attention to the destination-endorser congruence aiming at the best match possible, since a good fit between the potential consumer and the influencer may potentially result in more visits (Xu & Pratt, 2018).

Chatzigeorgiou (2017) studied the interrelation between celebrity endorsement marketing on social media and millennials' visit intentions for rural destinations in Greece and the dependence on the trust of a millennial in a specific influencer on his or her follower numbers and

the rural tourism values the influencer embraces. The study found that millennials' trust in influencer marketing is defined by the number of followers the influencer has, the perceived personality of the endorser, and the activities presented in the posts.

Gretzel (2018) noted the emergence of an influencer marketing industry with an increased amount of niches and professionalization among influencers. The researcher indicated a lack of studies that examine the travel influencer marketing phenomenon. In particular, the following aspects remain to be studied: how to conceptualize influence and design effective influencer campaigns, as well as how consumers perceive travel social media influencers and what constituted the persuasiveness of the content they produce.

### **1.5.2. Identifying the influencer and measuring the results**

Influencer marketing appeared as the most effective tool for companies to secure an authentic presence in social media and online communities and reach their target audiences. However, when collaborating with social media influencers, destinations face the challenge of selecting the right influencer and measuring the results of their collaborations. Both researchers and practitioners of influencer marketing find it particularly challenging to define the strength of influence of a specific opinion leader and measure the results of a collaboration with influencers (eMarketer, 2015). Over 67% of marketers state that finding relevant influencers is their most substantial challenge in influencer marketing (Influencer Marketing Hub, 2018 b).

The criteria applied to the selection process of bloggers and other social media influencers vary from one scholar or practitioner to another. In an attempt to identify influential characteristics of bloggers, Li et al. (2011) developed a marketing influence model that has three dimensions: network-based, content-based, and activeness-based, values that are essential in measuring the potential influence strength of blogs. Each of the factors may not be sufficient on their own – for instance, active bloggers may not necessarily be influential, but examined as a set, these categories can help marketers identify bloggers with real marketing value for their targets and carry out a successful eWOM marketing strategy.

Influencing bloggers are also defined as authors who have knowledge and expertise (Uzunoğlu & Misci Kip, 2014) and influence the world inside and outside the blogosphere (Li et al, 2011). The study carried out by Uzunoğlu & Misci Kip (2014) found that marketers view



the number of followers, the number of links to other social networks, the search engine rank, the quality of content, the prominence of the blogger, and the relevancy of their content for a brand as the key criteria for selecting an appropriate blogger.

Peltier (2018) argues that the following is not always the most important factor when destination marketers select partners for collaborations. Instead, such aspects as the level of engagement, the quality of the content and if an influencer fits the brand should be considered.

It was proved that a good match between an influencer and a destination tends to result in a better advertising perception level and can potentially lead to more visit intentions than a poor fit (Xu (Rinka) & Pratt, 2018). The importance of shared values between the endorsed brand and the endorser, as well as the intermediation of genuinely interesting content for the target group are pointed out as the key factors in the influencer selection process (PING, 2016).

Anderson (2018) argues that the engagement rates and the relevance of the content should be ranked highest when considering a specific influencer for a collaboration. These two factors are also the reason why micro-influencers can be more efficient for specific brands than those at the top of the influencer ‘food chain.’

Researchers also identify expertise, trustworthiness, and attractiveness as essential components of the credibility of a celebrity endorser (Tzoumaka, Tsiotsou, & Siomkos, 2016), where attractiveness is related to the perceived physical attractiveness of endorsers by the consumers. This factor can be equally applied to influencers other than celebrities. Attractiveness can also mean the attractiveness of design and usability of a blog, the quality of photos and the writing style of a blogger.

In order to help marketers orient in this variation of influence criteria, special digital tools have been developed for influence measurement. The engines for identifying the right influencers for a specific marketing campaign offered by such platforms as Kland and Klear are based on the influencers’ social capital and activity, content relevance, and the amount of successfully accomplished brand collaborations.

Along with the challenge of influencer identification, practitioners of influencer marketing often face a problem of measuring the results and tracking the ROI. Many travel brands seek

to work with influencers, but the uncertainty of measuring keeps them hesitant about choosing this method (Peltier, 2018). Among the most common practices of measuring the ROI of influencer marketing by brands are QR codes, trackable links, coupon codes, social media contests, etc.

To help companies with the challenges associated with tracking of the ROI in influencer marketing, platforms for content monetization, matchmaking services for a specific campaign's target, and post-campaign analytics have been developed. Traackr and Klear are such tools for influencer relationship management. They provide brands with a system for influencer discovery, management and analytics for the influencer relationships. The emergence of such digital solutions for selecting appropriate influencers and tracking the ROI marks the beginning of a whole influencer industry and makes influencer marketing easier (Gretzel, 2018).

Two decades ago, Kotler (1999) noted that the results of media campaigns in place marketing are especially difficult to measure because this process involves many interconnecting variables. According to Kotler, general measurement efforts should be designed to answer three main questions:

- What was the response obtained?
- Were the objectives met?
- What changes are recommended?

He also suggests measuring two aspects in advertising: communication effect and sales effect. The communication impact is most easily measured where direct response measurement can be obtained, e.g. in a form of a phone order or requests for additional information. The amount of enquires generated as the result of advertising is viewed as a viable measuring tool by Kotler (Kotler 1999, 198).

## **1.6. Approaches to strategies and strategic management**

Rumelt (2011, 6) defines a good strategy as a consistent process, “a coherent set of analyses, concepts, policies, arguments, and actions that respond to a high-stakes challenge.” He understands the process of strategic planning as identifying the critical challenge present in a given

situation and then paving a way to the solution to this challenge. A good strategy would perform the function of “a bridge between that challenge and action” (ibid, 77).

According to Rumelt (2011, 77-94), in order to design a good strategy, a company should first “diagnose” the nature of the challenge and identify the obstacles to be overcome. This process of “diagnosis” will reflect how the company perceives the situation and the context of the challenge it is placed into. The next step would be to devise an approach to deal with the obstacles identified in the previous stage, or the “guiding policy.” Finally, a consistent set of coordinated actions should be adopted in order to execute the guiding policy.

For companies, one of the challenges around the concept of strategy, however, is that it is often misunderstood as the same as strategic goals and objectives. In their turn, goals are often wrongly distinguished as objectives, when the former concept addresses values and aspirations of the company and the latter deals with specific operational targets (Rumelt, 2011, 52).

Mintzberg, Ahlstrand, & Lampel (1998) define realized strategies as patterns and intended strategies as plans (p. 11). The intended strategy is most often not the realized one, and vice versa, the realized strategy is seldom the perfect reflection of the intended one. Those strategies that are fully realized are called deliberate strategies, whereas those that failed to be realized at all are unrealized.

There is also the third type of a strategy, an emergent strategy – “where a pattern realized was not expressly intended” (ibid, 11). In his earlier work, Mintzberg (1994) argues that all feasible strategies have elements of emergent and deliberate strategies in them. Lucy Küng (2008, 121) underlines the emergent nature of strategy, arguing that “strategy is not decided and then carried out”, instead it emerges in the process of implementation. Mintzberg (1994) also criticizes the vision of strategy as a formalized plan, claiming that the most successful strategies are not plans, but visions.

Cravens & Piercy (2003, 200) consider an emergent strategy approach essential in a highly dynamic technology environment because it enables organizations to respond to sudden environmental changes which can open strategic windows (these may occur through changes such as the introduction of new technology, new channels, etc).

Chaffey et al (2012) also underline the importance of a more responsive approach to strategy formation when digital technologies develop rapidly, and new marketplace dynamics need to be responded to. Lynch (2000) explains that emergent strategy appears where the distinction between the three elements of strategy – strategic analysis, strategic development, and strategy implementation – becomes less clear. Instead of being linked together sequentially, they become closely interrelated.

Mintzberg, Ahlstrand, & Lampel (1998, 371) elaborated ten schools of strategy grouped into three categories (Table 1). Each school examines the process of strategy formation and the essence of this process differently. They argue that the design school contains the most constitutional and wide-spread beliefs about strategic management, with the central one defining strategy as "a fundamental fit between external opportunity and internal capability." (1998, 24)

Unclosing the advantages of the consistent nature of strategy, the authors challenge the understanding of consistency as a prerequisite that should be blindly followed. They argue that creativity thrives on inconsistency that enables new solutions and combinations along the way (ibid,17). The process of successful strategy formation should derive from a vision, not a formalized plan based on already existing strategies and established categories, as the planning school suggests.

Earlier Mintzberg underlined the difference between strategic planning and strategic thinking and the ability of the latter to allow for a strategic change due to it embracing creativity and intuition (Mintzberg, 1994).

Schools	Grouping	Strategy Formation	Essence
The Design School	<b>Prescriptive,</b> concerned with how strategies should be formulated	As a process "of informal design, conception"	"Looks <b>behind</b> , at established historical data"
The Planning School		As a "detached and systematic process of formal planning"	Looks <b>only ahead</b> and programs the strategies formed in other ways

The Positioning School		As an analytical process	"Looks <b>farther ahead</b> , to a strategic perspective"
The Entrepreneurial School	<b>Descriptive</b> , how strategies get made, aspects of the process of strategy formulation	As a visionary process	"Looks <b>beyond</b> as well as <b>beside</b> .. to the unique vision of the future"
The Cognitive School		As a mental process	Looks <b>inside the process</b> , through microscope
The Learning School		As an emergent process	"Looks <b>on the ground</b> , sometimes into the grass roots"
The Power School		As a process of negotiation	"Looks <b>lower (but not deeper)</b> : to places that organizations do not always like to expose"
The Cultural School		As a collective process	Looks <b>down from above</b>
The Environmental School		As a reactive process	Looks <b>on, "well above"</b> , through telescope
The Configuration School	A mix of prescriptive and descriptive	As a process of transformation	Looks <b>at and all around it</b>

Table 1: Mintzberg's ten schools of strategy, based on Mintzberg, Ahlstrand, & Lampel (1998, p. 5-7, p. 317).

In his fundamental work, Porter (1998) formulates two ways for a firm to possess competitive advantage: differentiation and lower price. A firm can differentiate by providing something unique and valuable for consumers, affecting the buyer. In combination with the scope of activities, the two basic types of competitive advantage lead to three generic strategies for achieving and sustaining outstanding performance: cost leadership, differentiation, and focus. The three generic strategies can be pursued by a company of any industry and size in order to create and sustain the competitive advantage. Porter's views fall into Mintzberg's positioning school (Table 1).

Cravens & Piercy (2003, 197) claim market targeting and strategic positioning to be the core dimensions of a market-driven strategy. For a company, to know which customers to target and how to position the product for each market is a prerequisite of successful strategy. Figure 1 illustrates the components of the targeting and positioning strategy suggested by them:

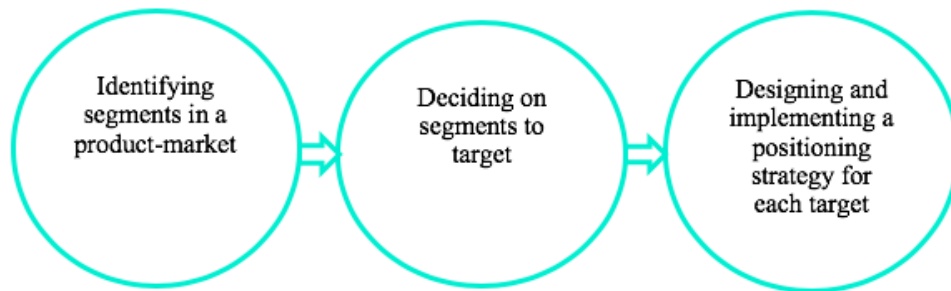


Figure 1: Targeting and positioning strategy, based on Cravens & Piercy (2003)

A company that competes in international markets can choose a strategy for targeting a single country, a region, or take a global focus. Strategic positioning involves selecting the positioning concept that reflects the perceptions the company wants buyers to have about a specific product. The positioning strategy is necessary to use as a focus for the marketing program. It ensures that the elements of the program are placed into a coordinated and consistent set of actions and support each other to achieve the positioning objectives (Cravens & Piercy, 2003).

Positioning is relevant for this study because this is the main strategy DMOs implement in order to differentiate. Their daily tactical operations are focused on “designing, implementing, and monitoring marketing communications that attempt to communicate the brand position” (Pike & Page, 2014).

The elements of a positioning strategy are the product, supporting services, distribution channels, price and promotion activities. Developing a positioning strategy includes defining the activities and results for which each component of the marketing program will be responsible (Cravens & Piercy, 2003, 212).

Mintzberg, Ahlstrand, & Lampel (1998) criticize the positioning approach as narrow, as well as those of other prescriptive schools. In particular, they state that analytical techniques prominent for the positioning school are not able to develop a strategy. They are only capable of bringing useful information into the process of strategy formation or extrapolating current

strategies or copying those of competitors, for example. Porter's views have a bias towards traditional large, established businesses, which is also reflected in conditions of stability (also typical for the design and planning schools). Moreover, the positioning approach is limited because it does not maintain the balance between external conditions, like the industry a company operates in and competition, and the internal capabilities of a company, and is biased towards the former.

According to Mintzberg, the process of strategy formulation in this school is substituted by strategic analyses and depicted as orderly and static, whereas real strategy is more dynamic, diverse and even "messy." Another concern is related to studying the established categories rather than creating new ones, and staying 'home' and "massaging numbers" rather than exploring 'outside' and learning. However, in comparison to the planning school, the adherers of the positioning approach have shifted the focus from the role of a planner in strategy making to that of an analyst, which is a significant development.

When addressing strategic management in media industries, Küng (2008) recognizes three interrelated approaches to strategy: rationalist, adaptive and interpretative.

Rationalist approaches view strategy as a plan that supports sustainable advantage, whereas the frameworks of the adoptive school seek to explain strategy as an evolutionary process that surveys the external world and responds to changes in the environment. The emergent strategy discussed earlier in this chapter is the primary example of an adaptive approach and falls under Mintzberg's learning school (Figure 1).

Interpretative approaches deal with those aspects of the organization which are not on the surface but can undermine the process of implementation of strategy: an organization's culture, values, mindset, motivation, and emotions. Despite being underrated in the process of strategy formation, they can both stimulate strategic change and hinder it (Küng, 2008, 122).

The interpretative school is closely linked to the adaptive school when it comes to understanding strategy as an ultimate change. The adaptive school deals with changes in routines and technology, whereas the interpretative approach takes care of cultural and social systems, placing into focus people working in the organization. The concepts concerning responses to technological advance are especially relevant for the media, digital marketing, and communications sectors, which are the subject of this current study.

The influencer marketing studied in this thesis is a phenomenon enabled by new media. New media, in contrast with traditional media, are based on digital technologies, accumulate digital

information and "usually involve connection to an open digital communication network" (Küng, 2008, 10).

In conditions when digital technologies develop fundamentally and fast, there is a need for a more responsive approach to strategy planning (Chaffey, Ellis-Chadwick, & Chaffey, 2012). The adaptive approach to strategy, or emergent strategy from Mintzberg's learning school, appears relevant for understanding and applying strategic management in the fast changing environment of new media, communication and marketing in the highly digitized tourism industry. In this kind of environment, a strategy should be flexible and be able to adapt to circumstances and emerging technologies. A purely emergent strategy, however, offers too little control, whereas purely deliberate strategy does not stimulate the learning crucial for staying flexible. A viable strategy is always a mix of both (Mintzberg, Ahlstrand, & Lampel, 1998).

Social media and influencers are elements of companies' digital marketing strategy. The digital marketing strategy usually aligns with the overall marketing strategy, it is formed as an adjustment to the latter with the aim to take advantage of online channels (Chaffey et al., 2012). It takes decisions on the target groups and different forms of value delivery for online channels, sets channel-specific objectives and develops channel-specific communication in accordance with the channel's characteristics and its user requirements (ibid, 218).

As Chaffey et al (2012, 198) explain it, the essence of the digital marketing strategy is to provide "consistent direction for online marketing activities of the company so that they integrate with its other marketing activities and support the overall business objectives".

Porter (2001, 62) argues that the main strategic decisions for digital marketing are the same as those for traditional marketing, involving selection of target customer groups and specifying how to deliver value to them. Segmentation, targeting, differentiation and positioning are key components of successful digital marketing.

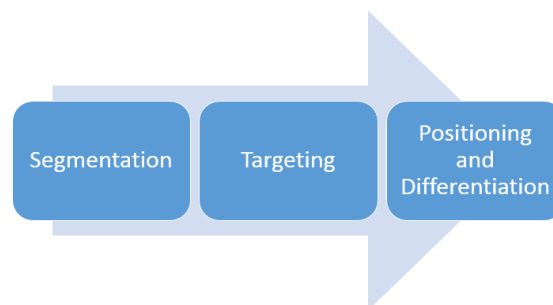


Figure 2: Porter's components of a digital marketing strategy, based on Porter (2001)



## 2. Research design

This chapter will present the research questions and discuss the data collection methods chosen for the case study, as well as provide an overview of the case company.

### 2.1. Research questions

Despite the growth of researchers' interest towards influencer marketing, there are several gaps in the academic literature to be addressed. In particular, a review of academic research identified a gap in studies of influencer marketing implementation by DMOs.

WOM in the travel industry has been extensively explored (Confente, 2015; Hernández-Méndez, Muñoz-Leiva, & Sánchez-Fernández, 2015; Kim, Mattila, & Baloglu, 2011; Litvin, Goldsmith, & Pan, 2008; Stokes & Lomax, 2002). There have been numerous studies conducted on travel-related blog content. However, this research has been limited to the interrelation of WOM and destination image, tourists behavior and tourists' attitudes towards a destination (Bosangit, McCabe & Hibbert, 2009). **There is still a gap to be filled in how destinations manage user-generated content in general for their marketing purposes.**

Influencer marketing has been recently studied in the context of travel and tourism, as well as destination marketing (Chatzigeorgiou, 2017; U. Gretzel, 2018; Luo et al., 2018; Xu (Rinka) & Pratt, 2018). However, these studies deal with questions of consumer behavior of travelers as the result of influencer marketing activities. **Academic research demonstrates a gap in the management of influencer marketing activities in general and in destination marketing in particular.**

Among other topics, previous research has failed to address the following aspects relevant for this study:

- How DMOs identify the right influencers for their marketing objectives;
- What role a DMO's manager has throughout the influencer marketing process;
- How DMOs measure the influencers' performance;

- What the difference is between paid and earned visibility for a marketer in terms of the content quality and measurement aspects;
- What objectives destinations pursue with their influencer marketing activities;
- How influencer marketing supports destinations' marketing objectives;
- How destinations promote their key marketing messages through influencers;
- What strategies are used to promote destinations through influencers;
- How DMOs manage their relationship with influencers;
- How strategic the process of influencer marketing at DMOs is;
- What strategies of influencer marketing for destination promotion prove to be more successful and why;
- How consumers perceive travel social media influencers and what makes influencers' content seem credible and persuasive

Using these points as a reference, this thesis aims to address the gap in the literature by examining recent domestic and international influencer marketing practices of one Finnish DMO, as well as its approach to the influence criteria and influence measurement. The thesis of this research is that influencer marketing is a viable strategic marketing tool that should be integrated in the overall marketing strategy of DMOs. On this basis, the study aims, first, to understand how DMOs use influencer marketing to promote their destinations, how they identify the right influencers to collaborate with and how they gauge the results. Second, it seeks to understand influencer marketing as an integral part of a marketing strategy. Then, it aims to provide an overview of the role of a DMO's manager in influencer marketing activities. Accordingly, these objectives translate into the following research questions:

### **Q1. How can a DMO implement influencer marketing in destination promotion?**

Sub-question a: What approaches to influencer identification can a DMO implement?

Sub-question b: How can influencer marketing support the strategic marketing objectives of a DMO?

Sub-question c: What approaches to results measurement work best for a DMO?

### **Q2. What is the role of a manager in the outcome of the destination's influencer marketing activities?**

The research questions aim at examining influencer marketing as part of the marketing strategy, in the context of generating positive eWOM for destination promotion, that raises destination awareness and visit intentions in the target demographics, as well as delivers the destination's key marketing messages.

The research questions are addressed through the case study of one specific DMO in Finland, Visit Tampere. The company organized the first trip for social media influencers in the year 2015. In 2017, social media influencer marketing was embraced as part of the company's marketing strategy.

Visit Tampere was deemed an appropriate case study for contextual and practical reasons. First, the organization has adopted influencer marketing as part of its marketing strategy. Second, the author is engaged in a professional relationship with the company, which allowed for access to data and enabled the conduction of the study as it was designed. The case study was deemed effective because it allows for in-depth analysis of a case bounded by time and activity (Cresswell, 2009, 43).

The qualitative approach was selected as appropriate for the purposes of this work due to it offering a deeper understanding of the processes, decisions, and choices of managers of a specific DMO. In its turn, this allowed for the findings to address the existing research gaps in the literature.

A case study method was adopted to explore the nature of collaboration with domestic and international social media influencers. The author chose an exploratory case study approach as the most appropriate strategy for meeting the objectives of this thesis.

The data collection techniques applied in this thesis included semi-structured interviews as the primary method, as well as observation and document study. The empirical data collection was conducted in two stages.

During the first stage, the author studied internal strategic documents, marketing plans and influencer marketing campaign reports, as well as observed the content generated by social media influencers which was the result of collaboration with the DMO in 2018. The content – blog texts, social media posts, visual materials, videos and photos – is the primary output of

influencer marketing activities. In the context of the literature review, the observation helped to identify and select the questions for the semi-structured interviews.

The second stage involved semi-structured in-depth interviews with the company's marketing and communication managers who are involved in the planning and implementation of influencer campaigns. The purpose of the interviews was to gain strategical and managerial perspectives on the influencer marketing process at the DMO, its stages, and factors that influence the decision making when selecting influencers for a collaboration in specific campaigns. Only employees involved in these processes could give a broader perspective on the DMO's influencer marketing activities, reveal their strategic and tactical approaches to influencer marketing and identify approaches to the measurement of results. The interviews were conducted in English and Finnish, recorded and transcribed. The interviewees received a copy of transcribed text for revision and approval.

Furthermore, the results obtained during the first stage were cross-referenced with the interview data to solidify the findings uncovered during the interview process and allowed for better exploration of the planning processes of influencer collaborations.

The author expects that the research outcome, built on the existing literature in destination marketing, word-of-mouth, influencer marketing and strategic management, will help destinations' communication and marketing managers to better position their destinations online, as well as find working approaches to plan, implement and measure their influencer marketing activities.

A Finnish DMO is interesting to study for several reasons. The increasing global awareness of Finland as an attractive travel destination is powered by the national tourism board, Visit Finland, which extensively collaborates with influencers from all over the world. Then, Finland has prominent presence on social media, and its official accounts boast one of the highest engagement levels among those of European destinations (Uşaklı et al., 2017).

Tampere is the second biggest city in Finland. The destination started integrating influencers into its marketing activities in 2015. At that time, the city did not have any strategy for influencers marketing, relying on the universal formula 'something for everyone.' When working

with influencers, instead of focusing on several selling points, the regional DMO tended to show everything worth showing, allowing media guests to bring a focus on particular things.

Over the past four years, the DMO of the Tampere Region, Visit Tampere Ltd, has initiated and organized hundreds of influencer marketing collaborations, both domestic and international. In 2017, the DMO selected nature, saunas, gastronomy and the Moomin Museum as the key marketing messages in the target markets, which was further reflected in its influencer marketing activities. In particular, several thematic campaigns that involved influencers were designed to support these choices.

This study will examine the DMO's influencer collaborations and the campaigns from the perspective of the company's marketing objectives. From the academic perspective, the research will fill the gap in studies of the management of the influencer marketing activities at a travel destination. The study will also offer a comprehensive empirical reflection on influencer marketing as a strategic tool for destination promotion and will shed light on the newest practices.

## **2.2. Data collection methods**

Case study research is a qualitative approach used by an inquirer to explore a bounded system (a case) over time, via detailed, in-depth data collection obtained through several methods (Cresswell, 2013). Cresswell (ibid, 96) advocates this empirical inquiry as a methodology, when the case study can be both an object of study and a product of the inquiry.

Yin (2004) states that a case study “investigates contemporary phenomenon within real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are evident”.

A core strength of case study research is operational data collected by a researcher who seeks to obtain an in-depth understanding of the case by directly observing “real time” (Woodside, 2017).

This thesis relies on the single instrumental type of case study in which an author first focuses on an issue and then selects a case to illustrate it and generate an in-depth understanding of it (Cresswell, 2013,98). The bounding parameter for the current case study is the timeframe in which the case is studied.

Case study usually involves multiple sources of information (Cresswell, 2013). This thesis relies on semi-structured in-depth interviews and observation.

The author gathered empirical data in two stages. First, she observed all influencer marketing campaigns implemented by the studied organization in the year 2018. During the second stage, the case study company's employees were interviewed for the purpose of obtaining managerial and strategical perspectives on the influencer marketing process at the DMO.

The primary objective of the interviews was to understand how influencer marketing activities support the strategic objectives of the company, how they are managed and measured, as well as to gain a better understanding of influencer marketing as a strategic tool in destination promotion. The goal behind the usage of the observation method was to access an array of online publications produced as a result of a partnership between the DMO and social media influencers, and furthermore cross-reference it with the data obtained through interviews in order to validate it or identify possible contrasts. This order is defined by the fact that the questions for the semi-structured interviews needed to be based on a certain level of previous study into the research topic (Wengraf, 2001).

However, the observation data in this research was necessary not only to formulate the research questions, but also to solidify the findings gained during the interviews and better explore the processes that destination marketing through online influencers involve.

The following sub-chapters offer a more detailed description of the chosen data collection methods.

### **2.2.1. Semi-structured interviews**

Interview is one of the most commonly used data collection methods, and the semi-structured format is the most frequently applied in qualitative research (Kallio, Pietilä, Johnson, & Kangasniemi, 2016). The semi-structured, in-depth face-to-face interviews were chosen for this study as they allowed the researcher to address more specific issues in the research questions (Bryman & Bell, 2011). Semi-structured interviews follow a common array of topics for each interview, may introduce the questions in different ways and let the participants answer them

in their own way (Matthews & Ross, 2010, 221). These characteristics of semi-structured interviews were deemed important for the methodology of this thesis. They allowed for formulating key topics for discussion and modifying further questions. The semi-structured interviews followed a predefined format to ensure that all topics were covered.

### **2.2.2. Participant observation**

Participant observation as a research tool allows for learning about the activities of the people under investigation “in the natural setting through observing and participating in those activities” and “provides the context for the development of sampling guidelines and interview guides” (DeWalt, 2012). As an employee of the studied company, the author was a participant observer. According to Yin (2009), professional involvement with the company under study provides the researcher with the role of a participant in the researched phenomenon.

However, this position has received some criticism, the most major of them being the potential influence the researcher may have on the behavior of participants (Matthews & Ross, 2010). Even though the extent to which the author’s professional engagement with the studied company might have influenced the interviewed employees is hard to evaluate, the author would argue that her familiarity with the interview participants enabled a smoother interview process and resulted in open and detailed answers from the participants involved.

Observation allowed the researcher to see how campaigns were planned and implemented in order to support the strategic objectives of the company, what kind of content was produced by influencers as the result of collaboration, and what were the actions and decisions of the employees throughout the whole process of influencer marketing. The author then contrasted this data with the interviewed employees’ answers.

## **2.3. Sampling and empirical data collection**

The sampling process was conducted in the following stages:

1. Case selection and selection of interview respondents
2. Documents selection
3. Selection of online content

### **2.3.1. Case selection**

The case company was selected by means of purposive sampling. Purposive sampling is a non-probability sample which occurs when the sample elements are logically assumed by the researcher to be representative and chosen based on judgment or expertise (Saunders, Philip & Thornhill, 2009). This method is often a subject to criticism due to its inability to generalize the findings (Saunders, Philip & Thornhill, 2009). However, this approach serves the explorative nature of this study better than random sampling, since the purpose of this research is to gain a better understanding of influencer marketing at the DMO and approaches to its measurement and management. According to Palys (2008), in a case study, a well-selected informant “would often advance the research far better than any randomly chosen sample of 50.”

In the selection of the interview subjects, the author took into account the size of the company (20 people) and the size of the marketing team (5 people), as well as the fact that both selected managers have been working for this company for over 10 years and therefore have obtained solid expertise relevant to the study, as well as a broader perspective of the case company’s current marketing strategy due to being able to place it into the context of previous strategies and marketing practices of the studied DMO.

### **2.3.2. Content observation**

The author observed online content published on different influencers’ channels as the result of their collaboration with Visit Tampere during 2018. This time frame was set as the one that best demonstrates the variety of influencer marketing activities in their diversity and will be easy to compare with or contrast against the interviews findings. Online content was observed according to:

- type of influencers based on their following;
- geography of the audience;
- type of content: blog posts, Instagram posts, video blogs (vlogs);
- main topics covered;
- audience’s engagement level with the content: likes, shares, comments.



The content was observed on the following online platforms: stand-alone blogs and blogging networks, Instagram, Youtube and Facebook since they clearly prevail among other channels in Visit Tampere's influencer collaborations.

Throughout the observation process screenshots and notes of the online content were taken. The observation allowed for obtaining of rich empirical data and shaping of the interview data, and the relation of the overall obtained data to the research questions of this thesis.

In addition the author analyzed internal reports that followed all influencer collaborations since the year they were initiated, 2016. Reports included, among others, the influencers' channels' demographics, the theme of the visit, the number of posts made as the result of collaboration, and the reach numbers of the produced content. Then, the company's current strategic plan was examined, as well as marketing plans of the years 2013-2018 with the purpose of seeing the dynamics of the marketing activities.

## **2.4. Case company**

This thesis aims to explore how DMOs take advantage of influencer marketing to communicate their key messages in line with their marketing strategy. It also sheds light on the managerial practices and routines of influencer marketing activities in the context of destination marketing. This chapter offers an overview of the case company in which the data of this research is grounded. The following sections introduce the organization and its structure in addition to providing an overview of the marketing objectives of the company.

### **2.4.1. Visit Tampere: mission and customer promise**

Visit Tampere Ltd. was formed in 2017 as the result of a merging of three organizations that shared the common mission of promoting Tampere, Finland as a travel destination, but from different perspectives. These organizations were the Tampere Convention Bureau, the Tampere Event Office and the tourism department of the Tampere Region Economic Development Agency (TREDEA). Together, these companies formed an expert organization for tourism, events and congresses in the Tampere Region, and the fusion was aimed at the integration of resources to pursue the goal of increasing the attractiveness of the area for visitors.

The company now operates with the objective to strengthen the position of Tampere as an internationally attractive destination for travelers, events and congresses. Visit Tampere Ltd. is a subsidiary of Business Tampere and is owned by the City of Tampere, which determines its strategic goals. The firm is a small to medium sized organization that employs 20 specialists in marketing, communication, events and congresses.

The mission of Visit Tampere Ltd. is primarily to increase the awareness level of the Tampere Region for international and domestic travelers and thus popularize it as a destination, enable events in the area and provide support services for event organizers, as well as support the growth of local businesses operating in the hospitality area. Visit Tampere works in tight co-operation with companies, organizations and developers, and its customer promise is to bring its partners more clients, visibility and networking opportunities. In order to succeed in delivering this promise, Visit Tampere targets the following objectives:

- to focus marketing and communication activities on strengthening of the international awareness of Tampere, and its image and attractiveness among travelers;
- to recognize and contact potential customers;
- to attract large scale cultural and sporting events to the area;
- to provide support and advice for event organizers;
- marketing collaboration with partnering tourism-related businesses in order to bring their offerings to the map and make them more visible to target groups;
- to facilitate the networking and collaboration of local businesses operating in the hospitality industry, the event sector and MICE tourism (Meetings, Incentives, Conferences and Exhibitions);
- to develop the prerequisites for operations and business opportunities for companies in the hospitality industry, and the event industry.

Potential visitors, congresses and event organizers are viewed as the most important target groups by the studied DMO. The organization's stakeholders are the City of Tampere, companies in the tourism and event area, international tourism-related and congress networks, media representatives and social media influencers, besides the local people.

## 2.4.2. Organizational structure

The studied organization comprises three major pools of skills and competence areas:

- Marketing and Communications
- Partnerships and Networks
- Event Services

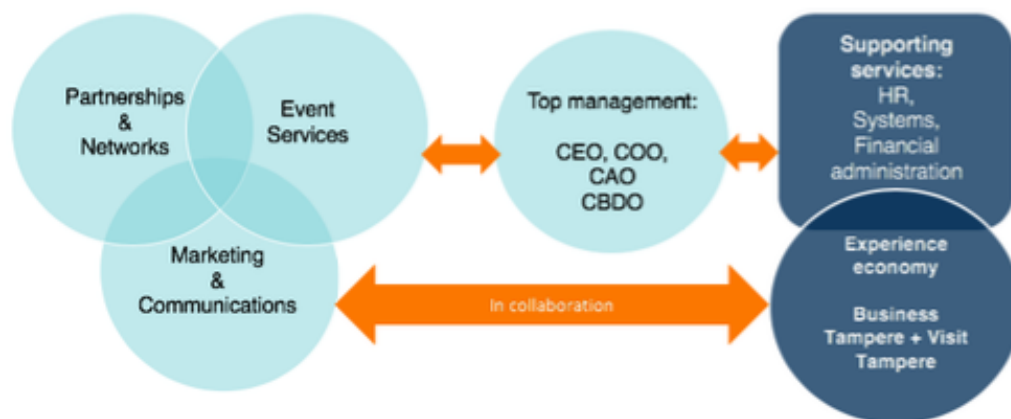


Figure 3: Organizational structure of the DMO

The main responsibility of the Marketing and Communications team is telling Tampere's story to the target audiences, increasing international awareness of the area, and developing digital marketing tools and channels. The team is responsible for the production and updating of marketing materials in both print and digital media – as well as PR activities, and media and online influencer collaborations in Finland and abroad. Additionally, it is concerned with the coordination and realization of joint marketing for partners and supporting the event marketing.

The role of the Partnerships and Networks team is to build long term partnerships with local companies and operators in the hospitality industry. The partnership and networks model of the company involves local businesses collaborating for the creation of an overall positive experience for visitors to Tampere. The companies that belong to the partnership network of Visit Tampere can participate in the planning of marketing campaigns together with the

DMO, and benefit from its various customer networks such as tour operators, event organizers, press contacts or PR partners, along with receiving marketing materials for usage in their promotional activities.

The Event Services team offers services and support for the organizing of events and events attraction to the area.

These three teams work together to produce the synergy necessary for the effective promotion of tourism of the region. For this, they work in tight collaboration with each other, and their heads report to the top management represented by the Chief Executive Officer, the Chief Operating Officer, the Chief Business Development Officer and the Chief Administrative Officer.

The focus of this study is on the marketing activities of the company and on the efforts of the Marketing and Communications team in promoting Tampere for domestic and international visitors. The author of this thesis is a Marketing and Communications specialist and a member of the Marketing and Communications team of the DMO.

### **3. Findings**

The first objective of this chapter is to observe how influencer marketing campaigns support the marketing strategy of Visit Tampere and how this is reflected in the content produced as the result of influencer marketing collaborations. The chapter will begin with the key marketing objectives of Visit Tampere, its main target groups and the marketing messages chosen for the investigated period. It will then present the findings on the content observation based on the content pieces produced in the year 2018. This part will particularly look into how the DMO's strategic themes had been covered in this content. The author will also pay attention to the social media platforms in these collaborations. Finally, the findings will be compared with the results of the interviews disclosing how influencer marketing activities support the marketing strategy of Visit Tampere.

The second objective of this chapter is to answer the questions of influencer identification and the measurement approaches that Visit Tampere applies to its influencer marketing collaborations, in addition to uncovering the role of a manager in influencer marketing activities.

### **3.1. Influencers as part of the marketing strategy**

This section will present the findings of the case study company's influencer marketing activities as part of their marketing strategy. It will give an overview of the main marketing objectives of the company and discover the extent to which influencer marketing supports them. The findings for this section are compiled from the results of content observation, participant observation, and in-depth interviews.

#### **3.1.1. Increasing awareness**

The Tampere Region is recognized domestically both as a travel destination and a place to live. According to national polls carried out every alternate year by the national research company Taloustutkimus, the south-central city of Tampere is the most desired place to live in Finland (Yle, 2018). In a survey to determine where Finns aged 15 to 79 would consider relocating to within Finland, the majority of 3500 respondents stated Tampere as their choice. This study has been conducted every second year since 2000, and all the findings for each year revealed Tampere as the top choice of the respondents (BusinessTampere, 2016), ahead of Helsinki, Turku, Oulu and other bigger Finnish cities. The city also holds the leading position in the latest study carried out in 2018, followed by Turku and Jyväskylä.

In addition to this, the city has been voted for by Finns as their favorite domestic travel destination (Yle, 2017). In the year 2017, Tampere held the top spot in the national survey to find Finn's favorite local travel destinations. The majority of respondent Finns placed Tampere first for its diverse offerings and friendly atmosphere, followed by Porvoo and Turku at the second and third positions respectively.

In 2017, Tampere broke the record of a million overnight stays and became the second most visited city in Finland after Helsinki. The total amount of overnight stays in Tampere was 1,090,000 (Yle (3), 2018). About 83% of them were made by Finnish visitors, while 180, 000 overnight stays were registered for foreign visitors predominantly from Sweden, Germany, the USA, and Russia (TAK, 2018). About 35% of these stays were business-related and 65% were for leisure.

The overnight stay statistics of 2018 show that the number of foreign visitors has significantly grown in comparison to the year 2017 – German travelers by 19%, Swedish by 11% and Russian by 9%.

The growing number of international visitors is one of the main strategic goals and challenges of Visit Tampere. This is mainly why the marketing activities of the company are concentrated on developing a positive international image of Tampere and popularizing it abroad because the more internationally popular Tampere is, the easier it is to attract events, congresses, and visitors to the area.

According to Visit Tampere's strategic documents, making Tampere known abroad is the primary objective of the marketing and communications activities of the organization. The activities of the Marketing and Communications team prioritize defining potential target groups in chosen markets while offering them information about the area and inspiring them to visit it.

The company's strategic decisions include targeting, differentiation and positioning. The destination formulated key marketing messages (which will be discussed further), as well as selected geographical targeting for these messages.

The organization aims to increase the number of visitors to the area, especially from abroad. For this purpose, Germany, the UK, Russia, Japan, and China have been selected as the most potent marketing areas. According to the market research conducted by the national tourism board Visit Finland, these countries have more potential travelers interested in Finland, Finnish lifestyle, culture and nature. In addition to these groups, the marketing efforts of the team are also focused on the cities of Stockholm and Riga because they have daily and almost daily direct flight connections with Tampere.

The tactical communications of the DMO are based on serving recognized target groups and offering them tailored information about the area. For example, through targeted social media campaigns, strategic communications aim at increasing the international awareness of Tampere and strengthening its brand. While communicating the destination's key assets to international target groups, the DMO prioritizes collaborations with media and social media influencers. The arrangement of press and influencers visits are, therefore, essential strategic marketing activities of the company.

When working with media outlets and opinion leaders, one of the objectives of Visit Tampere is that the content produced as a result of such collaborations may be used by local hospitality businesses and event organizers in their marketing to facilitate an increase in the overall awareness level and attractiveness of Tampere as a travel destination. The DMO's Head of Marketing and Communications (henceforth referred to as 'HM') remarked:

"Current, up-to-date information on the destination's offerings should be present not only on the DMO's website. We ensure that inspiring content about Tampere can be found on travel blogs, social media accounts and other online resources popular among our target groups."

The DMO pursues the following main marketing objectives:

- production of high-quality communication and marketing material by Visit Tampere;
- to integrate Visit Tampere's brand into Visit Tampere's communication and marketing activities;
- **an increase in the public awareness of Tampere via press visits and influencer collaborations that support the main marketing themes;**
- an increase in international visitors as a result of consistent search engine optimization that relies on the DMO's website visitors data;
- **social media campaigns built around main marketing themes in the target markets to popularize Tampere and bring traffic to Visit Tampere's website;**
- to fortify Visit Tampere's position as a competent partner of the local tourism businesses, media representatives and other stakeholders.

Influencer marketing is an integral part of Visit Tampere's marketing strategy. The Marketing Specialist (henceforth referred to as 'MS') of the company explains that even though influencer marketing does not hold the biggest budget share of the company's marketing expenses, it is a significant cost.

MS: "It [influencer marketing] is definitely a part of our marketing strategy. We have a separate budget for that, and it follows our marketing objectives. It's part of all our main campaigns, going hand-in-hand with social media ones, B2B activities and others. [...] It's also a big part of our marketing budget, though not the biggest one, because traditional advertising generally is more expensive."

The interviewed employees observed that despite being not the biggest marketing cost, influencer marketing takes an equal amount of personnel resources in proportion to other marketing actions.

MS: “If we look at the operational level, I would say influencer marketing takes as much of our work input as other marketing activities.”

HM: “We were purposefully growing the share of the influencer marketing activities on our overall budget, since it was our strategic choice to focus on these activities. It was our decision to allocate a bigger budget for it [...] and the implementation of these collaborations takes us as much resources as other marketing activities.”

Influencer marketing is one of the main tools that the DMO’s digital marketing strategy relies on. The digital marketing strategy of the company is an adjustment to the general marketing strategy, and it replicates existing offline segmentation, targeting and positioning in the online channels.

The following chapters will describe the background of social media influencer marketing at the DMO and will disclose how these activities support the marketing objectives and key marketing messages.

### **3.1.2. From paid advertising to influencer marketing**

Visit Tampere set a course for recommendation marketing in 2014 when the marketing team of the DMO designed its first pocket-size map that featured the recommendations of several Tampere locals to city visitors. The map, called ‘From Locals, With Love’ recommended favorite places to dine at; and where to have the best local food, where to spend a day with children, where to have the best experiences of summer and winter, where to enjoy water activities, shops, exhibitions, etc. The recommended places were genuine and non-commercial and led to the popularity of the map among tourists. It was distributed primarily in hotels, restaurants, city attractions and Visit Tampere’s tourist information office.

MS: “This was a major shift from A5-sized print booklets with some 30 pages of tourist information about Tampere and a solid number of related advertisements



paid for by restaurants, hotels, and stores – mostly those ones belonging to bigger chains. The production of the booklets was an expensive and time-consuming process, and part of the information was outdated by the moment they were printed.”

The booklet used to be the second most important marketing tool after the DMO’s website, until 2014 when the DMO was introduced on Facebook, Instagram, Youtube, and the biggest Russian social network VKontakte. With the growth of social media use and the launch of its own social channels, the DMO started paying closer attention to the content of its printed materials.

MS: “They [the materials] had to be in line with our social media content policy – to be not commercially driven and based on the locals’ recommendations. This is how we introduced our ‘From Locals, With Love’ map. There was not a single restaurant or tourism service provider that would pay their way into the map.”

As Visit Tampere’s new editorial policy excluded commercial influences in favour of the locals’ recommendations approach, the feature was included on the company website. The new web page consisted of over 50 articles with recommendations on where to have the best brunch, enjoy a low-budget overnight stay, have a spa vacation, how to spend a day in Tampere and how to make the most of it among others.

The new content policy resulted in divided opinions. On the one hand, the businesses that could not find themselves on the map were displeased with the initiative because the old webpage had listed nearly every place that held potential interest for tourists. On the other hand, there was a flood of positive feedback from customers.

MS: “We were often told that the content became more diverse and inspiring to explore the area – in other words, very beneficial for the tourism services promotion.”

In addition to these marketing materials, Visit Tampere relied on traditional press visits planned around certain topics. The DMO invited mostly travel-themed media outlets or papers of general interest. Several bloggers were included in the invited media groups as well, but this was only experimental and was not a systematic process.

In 2016, the DMO started inviting bloggers and Instagrammers to Tampere on a regular basis. Its first Instagram collaboration took place in January with four influencers from Moscow, Russia who had a combined following of over 800, 000 followers from Russia, Britain, and the USA. The theme of the influencers' visit was a winter city break for couples that targeted young travelers under 30 years of age who were seeking to explore unconventional destinations. Aided by the lenses of these particular influencers, Visit Tampere was inviting one of its most desired target audiences to an exotic experience of the snowy Finnish winter.

HM: "The results were awesome: we got plenty of lovely winter shots that engaged our target audiences really well. The guys got many enquiries about Tampere which they then directed to us [...] they were asked how to get here and where to have similar experiences."

Figures 4-6 demonstrate some selected results of the influencer trip organized in January 2016.



Figure 4: Post by @alex.mazurov on Instagram on January 11, 2016



Figure 5: Post by @anastasia.shuraeva on Instagram on January 9, 2016

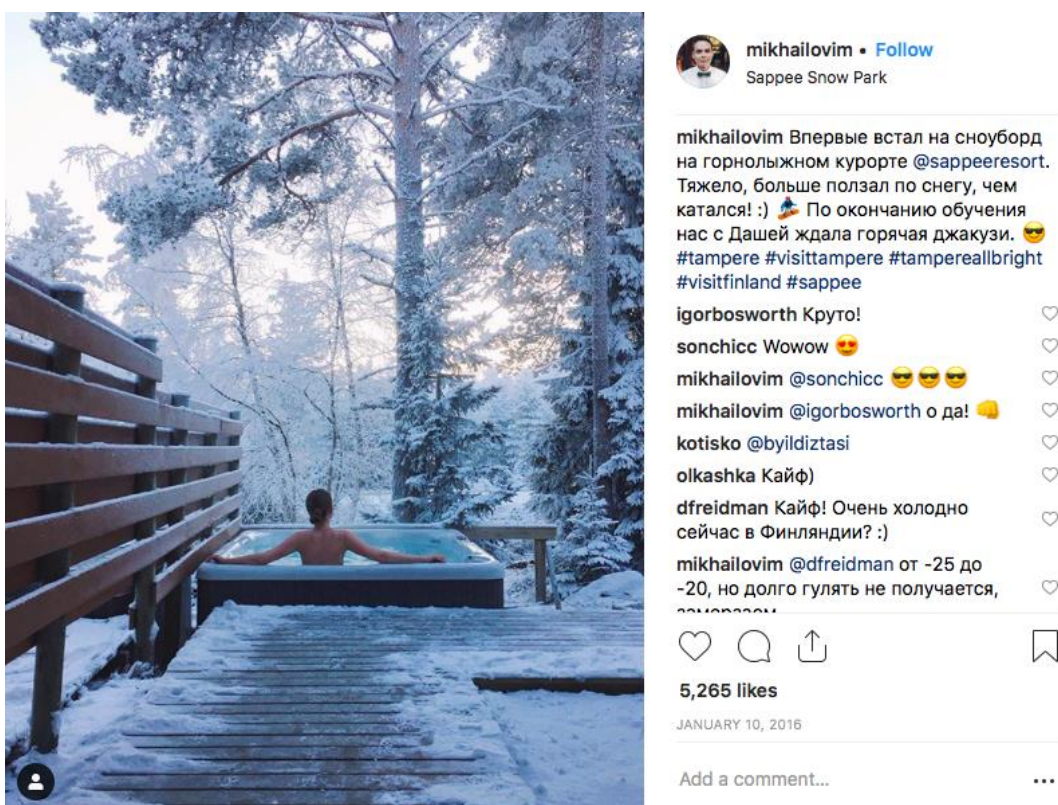


Figure 6: Post by @mikhailovim on Instagram on January 10, 2016

The Instagram posts produced during and after this trip received over 100, 000 likes and hundreds of comments. Consequently, this campaign successfully marked the beginning of influencer marketing as a more systematic and strategic process for Visit Tampere.

### **3.1.3. Reasons for influencer marketing**

Every year, Visit Tampere collaborates with dozens of influencers who range from internationally renowned Instagrammers to smaller Finnish bloggers. The respondents state that DMO marketing team views influencer marketing as a crucial tool due to the following characteristics:

- good price-quality relationship,
- effective combination of native content production and content marketing,
- uniting brand marketing with product advertising.

MS: "It's an effective use of our marketing budget, and is also an effective tool to spread our marketing messages because recommendations based on someone's personal experience are more trusted than a paid advertisement in a media outlet. Moreover, they [the influencers] also help us build and market our brand, and get our target audiences connected with our destination."

The DMO finds the price-quality relationship of influencer marketing more effective in reaching international consumers.

MS: "Reaching audiences abroad, which is our number one priority, is more expensive with tools other than influencer marketing."

Brand marketing occurs when bloggers share their positive image of Tampere and product promotion through their testing different services and products in the region. This process is supported by the blogs being search engine optimized which leads to Tampere being found online more easily. Regarding this, the MS says,

"The articles they [the bloggers] produce stay in Google and serve those who are looking for the destination or just bump into the content in search of inspiration or related information. We also pay attention at the bloggers taking care of their



SEO, [...] this raises the attractiveness of the city and the convenience with which the information on it can be obtained.”

Along with the introduction of the new website in 2017 that followed the recommendation-based editorial policy, the DMO concluded that bloggers and other social media influencers could create high quality content and simultaneously bring results with reaching the target groups:

MS: “In working with influencers, we kill two birds with one stone: we get original content and make Tampere known within the audiences they reach. [...] The reach can be even bigger when we want to enhance visibility through marketing the produced content further – for example, via paid Facebook promotions.”

Initially, the DMO’s influencer collaborations targeted international audiences. Later on in 2017, Visit Tampere partnered with the PING Festival which is the biggest influencer marketing event in Finland. This collaboration resulted in the DMO concentrating more on domestic influencer marketing. The MS remarked that the “domestic influencer market was full of great opportunities for promoting Tampere as a travel destination also in Finland”, and the DMO consequently began to actively collaborate with Finnish travel and lifestyle influencers.

In 2017, these collaborations were mentioned on a popular Finnish blog called *Lähiomutsi* that is about family life and traveling with children. The blogger who is a mother of two, produced a series of articles about Tampere as a weekend getaway while covering its public saunas, diverse restaurant scene, and family-friendly places and hotels. (Valtari, 2017 a, b, c)

The year 2018 saw the company organize visits of over 100 media representatives with a total potential reach exceeding a hundred million readers and viewers to Tampere. About 40% of the visitors were bloggers and other influencers who, together, formed a pool of 46 blogs and other social media channels.

It is pertinent to mention that the participants of press tours are often journalists with active social media accounts and a solid reach. Despite not being counted into a group of social media influencers due to the fact that the primary product of collaborations with them is editorial content for traditional print and electronic media outlets, they still sometimes bring social media exposure to the destination.

### 3.1.4. Finding a suitable influencer

A study of report documents revealed the following main ways the DMO finds relevant influencers:

- getting collaboration proposals directly from influencers;
- contacting influencers with a collaboration proposal;
- getting collaboration proposals via DMOs and partnering organizations;
- meeting influencers at different marketing events such as travel fairs, networking meetings or influencer marketing events.

MS: “We often get contacted by influencers and evaluate the collaboration opportunities, but we also search for proper influencers for our purposes ourselves, [...] for example, through certain hashtags or networks of our previous influencer partners; by listening to the buzz on social media and responding to everything relevant for us; and recently also by utilizing special software for that. However, I guess, what works best for us is having an employee who knows the influencers world well and helps us get connected with suitable influencers.”

In the instances of either being contacted by influencers or directly contacting them, the DMO estimates if a blogger can be useful for its promotional objectives. The decision is based on whether a blogger has an audience desired for the destination targets and the quality of this audience. Additional criteria includes the blog's visual aspect, its general theme, and the quality of its content. The DMO also takes into account the suggested date of visit as well as the content plan.

Visit Tampere regularly receives media collaboration proposals from Visit Finland, to which it gives priority on account of it being a trusted PR partner. This collaboration often allows for bringing in influencers that Visit Tampere cannot afford to on its own. Moreover, Visit Finland is usually the partner that connects the DMO with bloggers and journalists from across the world.

MS: “This [Visit Finland] must have brought us the biggest share of all our media collaborations. However, when it comes to influencers, now we more and more find them on our own using different tools.”

The DMO also cooperates with other organizations and influencers that are related to issues that are not directly associated with tourism, like skateboarding. In 2018, Visit Tampere partnered with Trelogy which is Finland's major international skateboarding event. Together, they organized a free-time programme for influential participants with significant followings that could be beneficial for the promotion of Tampere. A collaboration for a specific issue can include the travel aspect. For example, skateboarders can visit a public sauna and tag it in their social media account posts about their first experiences of a sauna or ice swimming in Finland.

MS: "In general, we take every possibility to benefit from such cooperations. Sometimes companies know influencers in their field better than we do. This may be the case with design and handicrafts, music and theatre, and we're open to their recommendations."

The DMO also follows influential international bloggers and invites them to visit the region of Tampere. In this case, the marketing specialist estimates beforehand if the blogger's target audience fits the DMO's marketing objectives, and might even have a pre-determined theme for the collaboration proposal. The realization of the collaboration then depends on the blogger's schedule and interests, and the overall expenses of the collaboration.

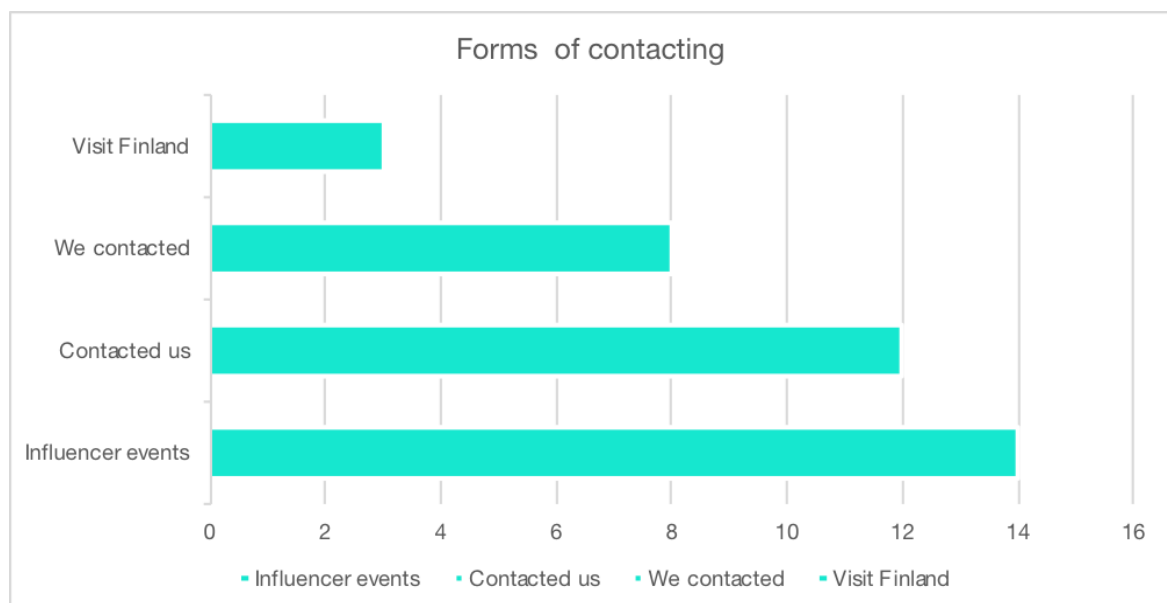


Figure 7: Forms of finding influencers at the DMO

Visit Tampere does not rely on the services of influencer marketing agencies to fulfil its objectives. Instead, the DMO values direct contacting and collaborations with major influencer events in Finland, and offers the programme in Tampere as a pre-tour or a post-tour to the influencers selected together with the organizers. The influencer marketing events that Visit Tampere collaborates with are the PING Festival organized in May in Helsinki, and the Nordic Bloggers Experience programme of MATKA travel fair that is held in January also in Helsinki.

These affiliations with influencer events are viewed by the DMO as an efficient way to find suitable content creators. The first reason for this is a significant concentration of bloggers from all over the world who participate in the event with the purpose of seeking to network and offer their services. Secondly, this is an efficient way to earn visibility as the bloggers and vloggers participate in a tour to one of the suggested areas and the DMOs of the areas do not bear any expenses except those associated with the organization of the trip. In other words, the DMO does not have to pay a fee to the invited content creators, which is the case if the same influencers are independently invited by the DMO regardless of the event.

Another reason behind the DMO choosing to work with influencer events is the events' expertise in the field on influencer marketing. The event organizers pre-select content creators for a specific DMO, and this service is particularly valued by the destination marketers.

MS: "We then proceed to the final selection with them, inviting to a post-trip to Tampere only those who fit our objectives."

The results of a documents study shown in Figure 7 lead to the conclusion that being a partner of influencer events was the major source for Visit Tampere's influencer contacts (40%). This is followed up by Visit Tampere marketing team being contacted by influencers directly (31%) and reaching out to them (25%). Five percent of social media influencers were obtained via Visit Finland in the studied period. However, the national tourism board is the main source of media contacts for the DMO's press visits.

It is important to note that the data represented in the chart is based on the collaborations that were completed. The figures could have been much bigger if the influencers seeking collaborations with the DMO had been considered, in addition to the finalized collaborations. Another



er pertinent point is that this study is based only on the data of 2018 at the end of which its biggest influencer marketing campaign was performed – the *Insta Camp*. Visit Tampere received numerous enquiries for collaboration after the success of the campaign, and some of them were being planned for the year 2019. The campaign will be given an overview separately in Chapter 5.1.6.

When identifying an influencer, the interviewees considered the following characteristics as most important: follower base, engaged audience, demographics fitting the marketing objectives, the quality and relevance of content, the quality of previous collaborations with other DMOs, and the ability to influence consumers' behavior. Interestingly, the interviewed employees ranked the influencers' follower base differently:

MS: "First, what we pay attention to is the number of followers and their relevance for us. It can be a smaller audience, but how it meets our targets is what matters. If it's a blogger in a special narrow niche, he or she can have a relatively small amount of followers and still be influential for us. However, in the case of international bloggers of wider interest, such as travel or lifestyle bloggers, the follower base should be bigger."

The size of the following plays a less important role in the domestic market.

MS: "Internationally, we've been concentrated on finding macro-influencers. With them, even a single shot with Tampere tagged can already make a difference for us. [...] with Finnish content creators, it's easier to keep it to a smaller scale. [...] They often would just contact us before their trip to Tampere and suggest a collaboration because they are anyway coming here – for a city break with kids, for an event or other reasons. We normally don't have to pay for such collaborations, we just arrange a visit, and the travel expenses of Finnish bloggers are also minimal, unlike those of foreign ones."

In addition to the size of the audience and its relevance, the DMO also evaluates the quality of content and previous collaborations, as well as the ability to communicate the city's messages to the followers and create a positive impression of Tampere.

HM: “An influencer is someone who can lead his or her followers to some actions. It’s not enough to have a huge following. An influencer has to engage his or her audience with the content, get reactions, comments, and in our case also create an impulse to action – to plan a trip to our destination or book a ticket to an event. [...] It is someone who directs the followers' behavior. What is important for us is that he or she would create an attractive picture of Tampere as a travel destination and inspire the audiences to travel here.”

Based on the aforementioned criteria, an online influencer for destination marketing purposes can be defined as **a person with a significant and engaged following on social media whose demographics are relevant to the destination’s marketing objectives, and who is able to contribute to a positive image of the destination and create the need to travel to it.**

Content observation reveals that the majority of influencer collaborations of Visit Tampere in 2018 were on blogs and Instagram. The importance of blogs in destination marketing has not decreased with the appearance of new social media platforms. This is partly because a blog text is a search engine friendly content form and can always be found via Google. Commercial collaborations with influencers are usually very well placed by the search engines (IAB Vaikuttajamarkkinoinnin opas p. 4). In addition to the texts of the blogs, there is often an opportunity for display advertising that allows for cross-promotion which can generate better results.

Visit Tampere considers Instagram as its most important visual marketing channel, especially in raising awareness about Tampere. It is used either as part of different influencer marketing campaigns or as a separate platform. Instagram stories enable realtime storytelling, and the audience engagement is high due to different audience activation tools like polls and questions. In the chart below (Figure 8), the use of Instagram in Visit Tampere’s collaborations is taken into account both when it was the main channel of content creation for a certain collaboration and as a supplementary one. However, its use as a primary channel of collaborations at Visit Tampere is as big as that of blogs. Facebook has been used solely as a supplementary channel.

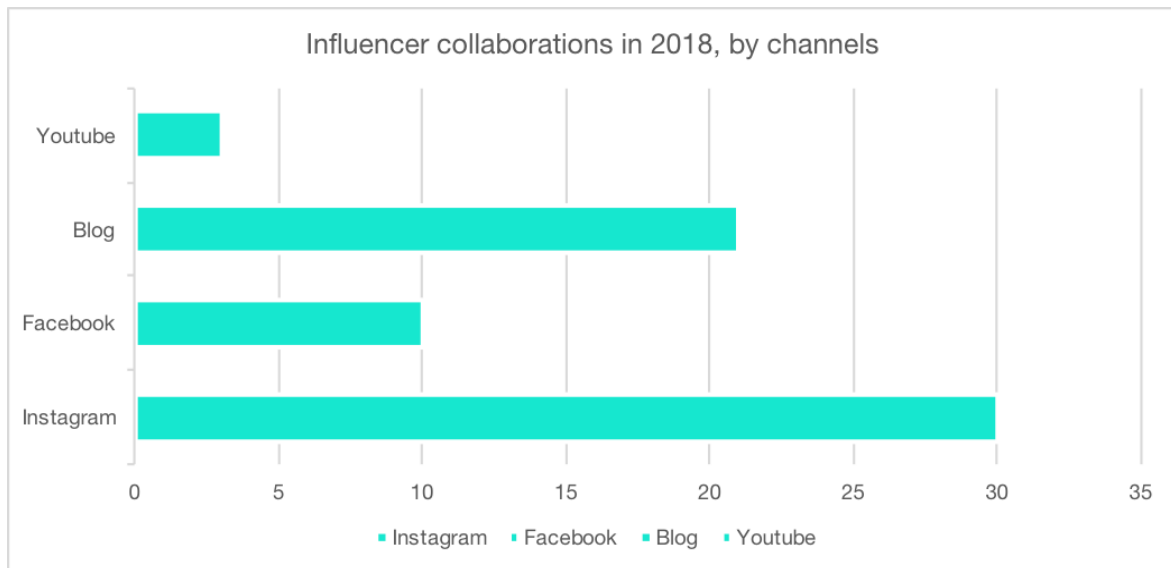


Figure 8: The DMO's influencer collaborations in 2018 categorized by channels

The proportion of organic reach and paid collaborations at the DMO has changed over the years from being purely organic to those including a monetary compensation for a distinct campaign with frequent occurrences. As the MS comments it,

“when you pay a fee for the collaboration you could expect a more carefully thought outcome that would be better tailored to the destination's needs.”

### 3.1.5. Strategic messages and target markets

This chapter will demonstrate how influencer marketing collaborations supported the main themes chosen for the international and domestic marketing of Tampere.

The document study allowed for an analysis of the collaborations performed by Visit Tampere in the year 2018. In particular, more attention was given to the influencers in question; their channels; and the type of the content they produced in the result. These collaborations can be categorized according to the following criteria:

- form of outreach,
- audiences geography,
- themes of collaborations.

The influencers the DMO worked with and their audiences were represented by the following countries: Germany, the UK, Japan, Russia, Sweden, Denmark, Norway, Iceland, Finland, Belgium, Spain, Italy, Canada, the USA.

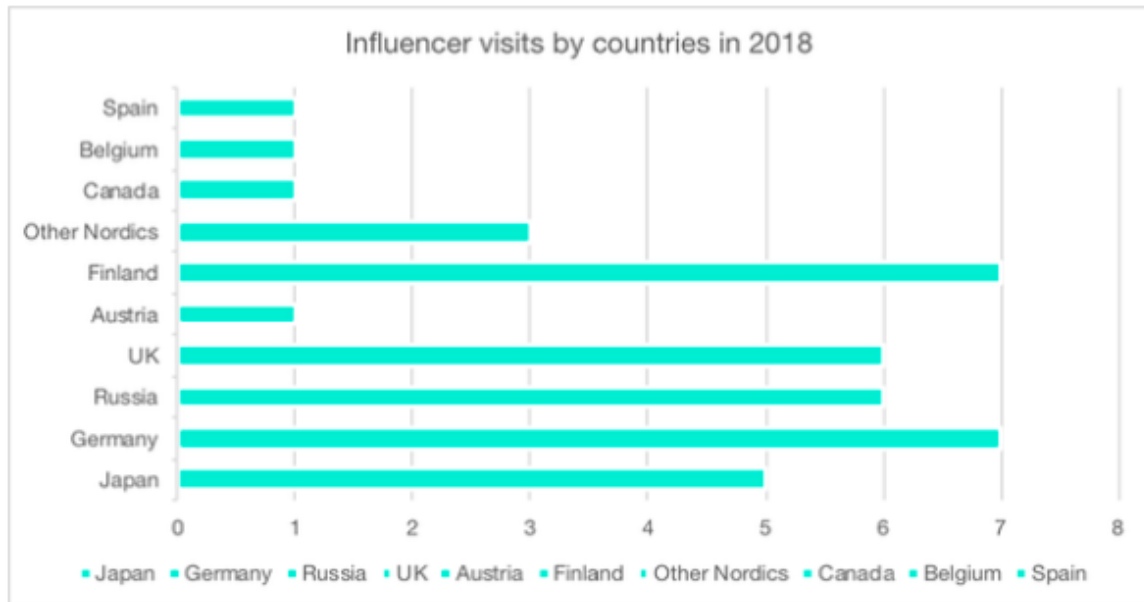


Figure 9: Geography of influencers collaborations in 2018

As evident from the chart above, the biggest share in the overall geography of influencers received by Visit Tampere in 2018 is represented by Germany (19%), Finland (19%), Russia (16%), the UK (16%) and Japan (14%).

In 2017, the DMO chose its main marketing themes based on the studies of Visit Finland. Sauna, Moomin, nature, and food represented the main selling points of the destination for strategic markets and shaped the main marketing messages both domestically and internationally. However, the concepts of sauna and peaceful Finnish lakeside nature are given more international importance due to them being the destination differentiation point and their exotic appeal. The influencer marketing actions of Visit Tampere have been supporting these strategic themes.

HM: “Our influencer marketing follows these strategic choices; it is fully based on them and is never planned separately from them.”

Content observation and document study proved these themes to have been extensively present in influencer marketing collaborations of the DMO. The topics ‘sauna’, ‘nature’, ‘restaurants’, ‘cottage life’, ‘the Moomin Museum’, ‘summer and winter activities’, and ‘local food and restaurants’ were identified as having been prevalent in 2018. Among them, nature proved to be the absolute leader, receiving 31% of overall coverage. It was followed by public saunas (22%), gastronomy (17%) and the Moomin Museum (12%), as seen in the chart on the Figure 6.

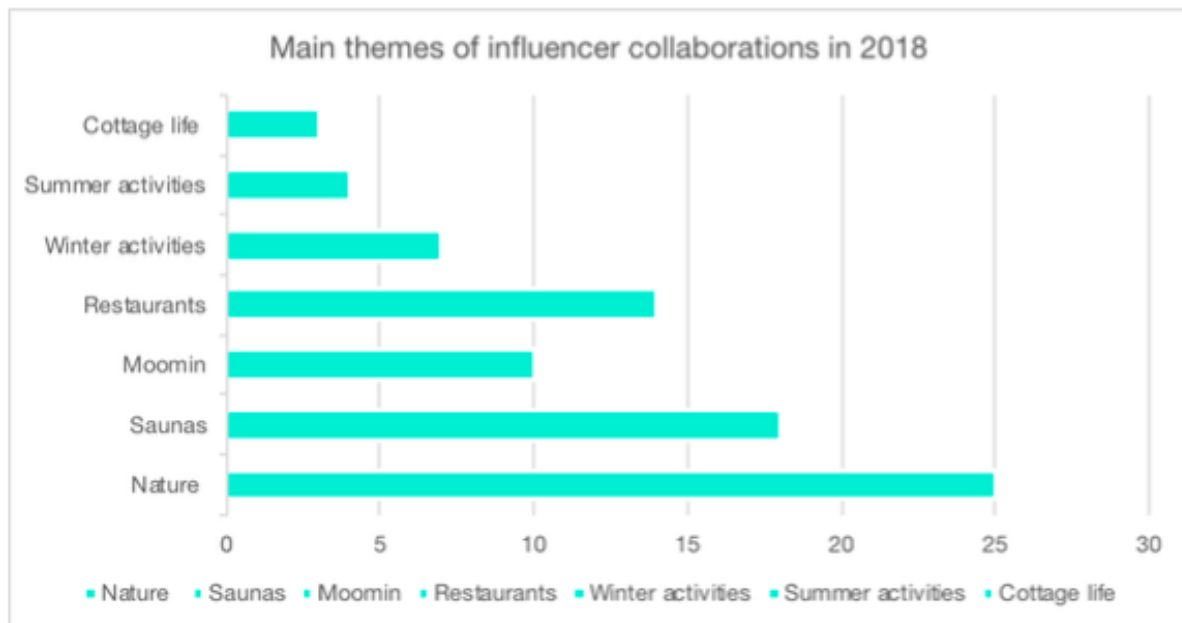


Figure 10: Main themes of influencer collaborations at the DMO in 2018

The topics covered as a result of collaborations between Visit Tampere and influencers demonstrate that the DMO’s key marketing themes have been present in all of them, albeit to a different extent. In cases when the main focus of a piece of content was something else like a motorbike road trip in Finland or a family getaway, the above-mentioned topics remain integral for each of them. Nonetheless, sauna and nature experiences have been the basic elements of all international influencer visits.

In the content observation stage, more than 200 pieces of content, including social media posts in those cases when the main collaboration outcome was a blog post or a video on Youtube were analysed. The analysis demonstrates that Tampere had been presented in the influencers’ content as ‘the Sauna City’, ‘the City of Pure Nature’ with lakes and splendid opportunities for lake activities all year round, stunning national parks, a city getaway for

Moomin fans, and a destination for foodies. The following chapter will provide an overview of the strategic themes of Visit Tampere and their coverage in influencer collaborations.

### **a) Sauna capital of the world**

In June 2018, Tampere was granted the official status of the Sauna Capital of the world because of its unique local sauna culture and the record amount of public saunas in Finland – 35. The status was granted by the International Sauna Association and The Finnish Sauna Society. It was also based on the fact that the Tampere sauna scene includes both the oldest public sauna in Finland that is still in use and the newest sauna in the country. Tampere has been positioning itself as the area where anyone can relax in a sauna throughout the year, and this feature has been its competitive advantage in relation to other areas where the amount of public saunas open for everyone for a modest fee is either significantly smaller or limited to zero.

The local sauna culture in Tampere is spiced up by a strong tradition of winter swimming or swimming in the lake water in sub zero temperatures. The fact that many public saunas in the region are located by the lake, including three out of those five situated near the city center, makes the experience of swimming in the cold water or even ice hole dipping relatively accessible also for those who have never tried it before.

The relaxed lifestyle of Tampere's local population who enjoy saunas and lakes all year round is particularly exotic and attractive to foreign visitors. Even those who have had a prior experience of a Finnish sauna often tell they were finally 'baptized as a Finn' after their testing of one of Tampere's public saunas. The unique local sauna culture that has been developing steadily for an over a century also draws the attention of media from all over the world:

MS: "We receive over a dozen of sauna-related press and blogger visits a year. Last year in particular, Tampere's saunas were visited by journalists of *The Daily Telegraph*, *Chicago Tribune* and *The New York Times*."



Figure 11: Tampere's sauna culture and winter swimming featured in the Wired magazine (Mallonee, 2018).

Observation of the content allows the conclusion that the topic 'sauna' was covered in 22% of social media influencer collaboration cases of the DMO, and sauna was presented both as a summer and winter activity. Foreign content creators referred mostly to winter swimming when describing their sauna experience in Tampere; whereas Finnish influencers shared the variety of public saunas in Tampere and their accessibility with their followers, combining this traditional sauna experience with those of fine dining restaurants, shopping, and museums.

## b) Nature

Tampere's unique and diverse sauna scene combines well with the nature theme chosen by the DMO as one of its strategic focuses. Tampere has been positioning itself as 'a bustling city next to pure, peaceful nature'. The dynamic environment, services of a big city, and the cultural life and events of the capital scale form a unique combination together with the lakes and forests located within walking distance of the city center. Situated on an isthmus between two major lakes – Näsijärvi and Pyhäjärvi – Tampere with its industrial architecture, innova-

tive restaurants, shopping and accommodation opportunities represent an outstanding package for travelers who seek to enjoy pure nature and city life at the same time.

The area boasts two national parks – Seitsemien and Helvetinjärvi – with their splendid hiking routes, camping sites, and fireplaces open for everyone, forests with endless opportunities for summer and winter activities – from skiing and snowshoeing to Nordic walking, as well as berry and mushroom picking. The region is dotted with over two hundred lakes, smaller to bigger ones that connect Tampere with the neighboring towns and municipalities. The lakes bring paddling, canoeing, fishing, swimming, and boating to the map of the city summer activities, and these are the things well found by tourists, as well as discovered by nearly every blogger or media representative visiting the area in the summer.

HM: “Things that we locals take for granted – the proximity of nature and forests around us, are taken by foreigners as one of the strongest assets of the region. Piece, quietness, and wilderness has been in particular appreciated by our Japanese and British media guests. [...] Berry picking, cooking over the open fire in the woods, forest yoga, for example, can be the things that bring them this “wow” feeling and unforgettable experience of Tampere, and Finland in general.”

MS: “Influencer marketing has always been in line with our general strategy and our main selling points. Nature is always one of them, hence the most important one – both domestically and internationally. We show them our local nature gems and let them enjoy the experience, sharing our love for the beautiful Lakeland nature. [...] We also want to show how close nature is to the city centre here. It’s a pretty unique location in the middle of all these lakes. [...] In our influencer collaborations, we aim at getting people interested in that sort of combination, as well as restaurants and hotels.”



## SEITSEMINEN – SUOMEN ONNELLISIN KANSALLISPUISTO

17/06/2018



MARINELLA "MONNI" HIMARI

Hei! Olen Pohjois-Savon havumetsistä unelmieni perään lähtenyt [luontokuvaaja](#), retkeilytoimittaja ja tuleva eräkirjailija: lukuisilla luontokuvillani varustettu, syksyllä 2019 julkaistava esikoisteos nivoo yhteen vuoden 2018 eräretket ja

Figure 12: Post "Seitseminen, the happiest national park in Finland" in Kaukokaipuu blog. (Himari, 2018)

## Kolme päivää Tampereella – sopiva yhdistelmä luonto- ja kaupunkilomaa

4 kommenttia

4.6.2018

**Kaupallinen yhteistyö:** [Visit Tampere](#)



Tampere on yksi suosikkilomakohteistani. *No kidding*, hirveän hieno kaupunki.

Figure 13: Post "Three days in Tampere – a suitable combination of nature and city break" in Aamukahvilla blog. Simojoki (2018)

Nature was featured in over 30% of influencer collaborations of the DMO in the period of study. One of the best examples of how nature was presented by Finnish influencers is the collaboration with two nature-themed Finnish blogs – *Kaukokaipuu* and *Aamukahvilla*. These bloggers came to Tampere in May 2018 for three days, explored the national park Seitsemien and demonstrated how comfortable an overnight stay in one of Finland's ancient forests can be, in addition to showing how easy it is to combine the wilderness with the finest restaurants and hotels in Tampere.

The collaboration was aimed at younger nature lovers in Finland to motivate them to spend a summer weekend in Tampere to enjoy its nature sights and the city center with its museums, restaurants, and shops.

MS: "This is one of the best of our nature-themed influencer partnerships in 2018. We invited them to write from a different perspective on why people should come to Tampere in their summer holidays. [...] They came together but wrote different stories. It's always good to have several influencers at the same time because they can take photos of each other, and the atmosphere on posts is better in comparison to solo travelers. And we reached better because they mentioned each other in their posts that gave us a bigger exposure."

The objective to increase the volume of international nature-related tourism in the area resulted in the nature theme being the main one in international influencer collaborations. However, nature has not been one of the factors that would attract visitors to Finland also in the least popular times of the year, namely late autumn or early spring. Tampere marketers find late autumn as an especially challenging period for tourism in the area since it is the darkest time of the year with unfavorable weather conditions, especially for exploring nature.

In 2018, the DMO decided to demonstrate that the experience of Finnish nature at the end of November, which happens to be one of the least popular times to visit the country for leisure, can also be enjoyable. The area's first nature-themed *Insta Camp* – *#InstacampTampere2018* involved exploring the national park Helvetinjärvi, the new outdoor area Kintulammi, saunas, and local food experiences.

HM: “We wanted to show that nature can bring some amazing experiences also in the depressing time of rains and darkness, to show that weather is an attitude. The concept of the *Insta Camp* was built around this idea. [...] This is definitely our best international campaign of the past year [2018].

Five nature-focused Instagrammers from Germany, Iceland, Finland, and Russia with combined following of 800, 000 spent a weekend in the autumn countryside in November 2018. They were based in a cottage by the lake and traveled from there to explore the natural gems of the region and take pictures in challenging weather conditions.

The gastronomic aspect of the adventure was covered by one of the best local restaurant chefs cooking breakfasts, lunches, and dinners for the crew. The chef joined the team to challenge his own skills by having to devise a menu of local ingredients over an open fire at public campfire sites. The sauna was also an integral part of the experience, with the yurt sauna placed in the dark forest of the national park being the most exotic and photogenic adventure.

The campaign resulted in 26 posts (Figures 14-16) with over 110, 000 likes and over 50 Instagram stories that made Tampere shine on Instagram globally until the end of the year. Another outcome of the *Insta Camp* was the visibility it received in the Finnish media. National public broadcaster YLE covered the campaign in the national evening news and published a story in the news portal. YLE’s regional office created a TV and a radio programme; and the most watched talk-show in Finland – *Puoli Seitsemän* – also gave the campaign extensive coverage.

All the foreign participants of the campaign experienced Finland for the first time during this trip, and succeeded in capturing the attractiveness and beauty of the country in autumn. As a result, the DMO received dozens of collaboration proposals from other influencers willing to visit Tampere and share a similar experience, besides numerous questions from Instagram users who wanted to travel to the places they saw in the posts of their respective influencers.

MS: “This is definitely our best international campaign of the past year [2018]. We reached a lot of people, and, surprisingly, received great visibility also in the national media.”

National parks and hiking prove to be the most covered topics by nature-themed influencer visits organized by the DMO in 2018. Other popular perspectives included urban nature and the proximity of forest and lakes to the city center, as well as lake activities like canoeing, standup paddling, kick-sledding and skating on the frozen lakes.



Figure 14: Post from Ruovesi by @asasteinars on November 28, 2018





National parks and hiking prove to be the most covered topic by nature-themed influencer visits organized by the DMO in 2018. Other popular perspectives included urban nature and the proximity of forest and lakes to the city center, as well as lake activities like canoeing, suppuddling, kick-sledding and skating on the frozen lakes.

### **c) The world's only Moomin Museum**

Finland is internationally known for being the birthplace of Tove Jansson and Moomin. The Moominworld amusement park that opened in 1993 in Naantali, near Turku, has been one of the area's major international and domestic attractions, especially for families with children.

In June 2017, Tampere received its own special spot on the map of Moomin fans globally when the world's only Moomin Museum opened in the city. The museum's collection is formed by over 2000 exhibits that include mainly Tove Jansson's original drawings and 3-D tableaux that were personally donated by the author to Tampere Art Museum in 1986. The unique collection received its own museum only 21 years later. The original illustrations by Jansson exhibited there leverage the museum as an art museum and appeal to Moomin books lovers which is in contrast to the Moominworld park in Naantali based on the Japanese-animated Moomin TV show rather than directly on the Moomin books (Yle, 2012).

During the first year, the museum welcomed over 100,000 visitors ("Moomin Museum's Guest of Honour", 2018). Soon after the museum's opening, Tampere's new connection with the world of Moomin resulted in the city being discovered by journalists and visitors from Japan, where the characters created by Tove Jansson had gained popularity via the animated TV series produced in the country. The next biggest groups of the Moomin Museum's visitors were represented by Britain, Russia and Germany. The museum enjoyed outstanding organic visibility especially in Britain, and was covered by the country's most read newspapers and magazines, like *The Independent* and *The Guardian*.

The DMO created different social media campaigns to attract attention to the museum, which include the Guest of Honour competition on Instagram in 2018 that was aimed at finding the most dedicated Moomin fan in the world. The winner (who was chosen out of hundreds of applicants from different countries) was invited on a five-day trip to Tampere as the Guest of

Honour to be received by the city vice-mayor and to explore the Moomin Museum in August of the same year.

In addition to this campaign, the DMO organized several Moomin-themed press trips that brought the museum visibility in the major British, Russian, German and Japanese media outlets. Compared to the positive results of these direct marketing activities, the Moomin theme was not as extensively present on the influencer marketing side. It was, however, the fourth most covered topic by influencers who visited Tampere in 2018 (Figure 10). The influencers who visited the museum represented two main groups: families with children, and young adults between the ages of 20 and 30.

#### **d) Making Finland #HungryForTampere**

The local gastronomy and the outstanding restaurant scene is the next strategic message selected by Visit Tampere for area marketing. Content observation found this theme to be the third most covered in the DMO's influencer visits (Figure 10).

Although it is not always the main focus, the food aspect is present in almost 100% of Tampere-related media content, with influencer visits lasted for at least a day.

In 2018, the DMO designed a new approach to present Tampere as a gastronomic travel destination, and it was based entirely on the influencer approach. The destination came up with the strategic campaign *Hungry for Tampere* and the related hashtag ‘#hungryfortampere’ that were aimed at increasing public awareness of the local restaurants among Finnish and international travelers, and enhancing gastronomic tourism in the area. The city had the prerequisites for the purpose of helping travelers discover new dining places and make the diverse food scene in Tampere gain deserved recognition: Tampere’s craft breweries offer globally awarded beer; innovative restaurants experiment with pure local seasonal ingredients; and numerous food-themed festivals have been attracting visitors to the city for years.

This campaign was based on Visit Finland’s *Hungry for Finland* food travel strategy. The strategy focused on the development of culinary experiences and food tourism products in a way that would promote Finnish food culture to a new level and improve its local and international image.

The *Hungry For Tampere* campaign was planned only for the domestic market and targeted Finnish visitors looking for an original and high quality restaurant experience inspired by pure Finnish nature and local lifestyle. They are described in the campaign strategic plan as united by curiosity, diversity and activity. The restaurants selected for the campaign had to have the following prerequisites:

- excellent food,
- enjoyable ambiance,
- being able to provide gastronomical experience,
- having an interesting and distinctive story.

The campaign united 35 restaurants, gastronomic professionals and social media influencers. The five influencers chosen for the campaign were given the title of ‘Food Ambassadors of Tampere’. The ambassadors’ expertise in the restaurant world was considered high enough to generate a long-term visibility for the campaign and create an image of Tampere as an excellent gastronomic destination. The influencers shared their impressions of the restaurants in their blogs and social media channels, as well as on the Visit Tampere website which helped travelers discover new dining places. The implementation of the campaign also involved several gastronomy-themed press trips to Tampere from the capital area and motivating restaurant goers to use the hashtag ‘#hungryfortampere’ whenever they shared their restaurant experiences on Instagram.

In 2018, the ambassadors produced 16 articles that highlighted the locality, authenticity, creativity, pureness and high quality of the food of the selected restaurants. They also introduced to their audiences the hashtag that united the positive experiences of restaurant goers in Tampere.

MS: “We’ve managed to get great coverage in Finnish blogs and media, [...] and for us having the restaurants represented is already a victory. The fact that the hashtag was taken in use by restaurants and restaurant goers is an achievement.”

The campaign was also described by the interviewed persons as a new and more attractive way to use influencer marketing as a tool to meet strategic marketing objectives.



### 3.1.6. Conclusions

The overview of the campaigns and the interviews with the managers responsible for the marketing at the DMO allow the conclusion that influencer campaigns and collaborations organized or supported by the DMO were in line with the organization's strategic objectives. Although carried out to different extents, the collaborations were designed to serve the main marketing messages of the destination in the chosen target markets.

Influencer marketing is a vital part of the DMO's strategy and is documented as such in the current strategic plan. It is also one of the main marketing tools on the B2C side, and is one of the main tools employed in digital marketing strategy.

Influencer marketing also caters to the DMO's client promise to bring businesses to partnering companies by providing the partnering companies visibility in their target demographics.

However, the choice of themes for the collaboration was also predetermined by the themes of the influencers' channels and their choice of content. For this reason, the proportion of the themes covered as a result of collaborations with social media influencers did not necessarily accurately reflect their priorities. The frequency of the four themes – 'sauna', 'nature', 'food', and 'Moomin' – appearing in blogs was influenced by how often the collaboration opportunities with bloggers interested in a correspondent theme occurred.

MS: "Depending on the influencer and their channels, we might want to highlight Tampere as a family destination, a cultural and gastronomic getaway or a nature lovers' paradise, for example."

Among all themes covered by the influencers that the DMO worked with during the studied period, nature dominated both internationally and domestically. It is often presented and seen as an attractiveness factor of the region, the reason to discover Tampere and an essential part of its image.

HM: "We position our destination as a place to enjoy calm and tranquility, recharge the batteries and get peace of mind. So our influencer collaborations, especially international ones, are also aimed at bringing this focus."

Nature received equal attention from foreign and domestic social media content creators. Sauna and public saunas proved to be more present in the international influencers' channels, as well as the Moomin Museum, whereas food and gastronomical experiences were most actively promoted via Finnish influencers due to the *Hungry For Tampere* campaign planned as a domestic one.

The interviews and content observation also allowed for identification of the main objectives for influencer marketing at the DMO. In the chosen foreign markets, the aim is to increase the publics' awareness level of Tampere, while domestically, it is strengthening the positive image of the area, staying competitive and creating the need for Finnish travelers to keep visiting the area for leisure:

HM: "Despite Tampere's image as Finn's favorite getaway, we still have to take care of staying competitive. All the time something new appears, products or services for tourists. We have to maintain this leading position."

### **3.2. Measuring the results**

Practitioners of influencer marketing highlight the following measurement criteria of influencer marketing:

- views (organic and possibly paid ones),
- audience engagement (comments, shares, likes),
- amount of time that the consumers spent with the content,
- clicks from the influencer's content to the marketer's own content,
- growth of the marketer's own social media channels, and
- sales growth of certain products through affiliated marketing.

The following formula is offered in the Influencer Marketing Guide designed by a group of Finnish major influencer marketing agencies, leading media corporations, publishing houses, and influencers. It is recommended that marketers refer to it when planning their collaborations (IAB Vaikuttajamarkkinoinnin opas, 2019).

The measurement criteria of the studied DMO applied to influencer collaborations involves all of the above-mentioned measures, albeit to a different extent. In the list above, views and

audience engagement are seen as the most important measurement tools. The DMO defines audience engagement as not only the number of comments and likes, but also as the engagement of the influencer with the audience, and how actively he or she interacts with the followers and answers their questions.

At the same time, clicks from the influencer's content to the DMO's website and growth of the DMO's own social media channels are considered to be of lower priority by Visit Tampere's marketers.

MS: "We pay attention to the growing numbers of visitors on our website after a certain collaboration, but this is not the basic criteria of its quality."

On the contrary, it is the content spreadability and dissemination that matter. The *Insta Camp* campaign, for example, demonstrates how the effect can be multiplied when the content is unique and valuable for other influential accounts to share, along with being inspiring enough for the media to make a story about it.

MS: "Our best efforts in tracking influence would be to follow how the Tampere-related posts are doing in the influencer's channels, whether they receive likes and comments, and how well the content finds its way to the users' own social channels."

The amount of publicity one particular influencer campaign can cause is not always the criteria of the campaign's efficiency, but is rather an identification of the outstanding performance of both the collaborating influencer and the DMO.

The interviewees mentioned that influencer collaborations are hard to measure due to the fact that the DMO does not sell anything directly to the consumers. However, there is a basic set of criteria that is applied to all partnerships with content creators. The DMO relies primarily on visibility and reach as the criteria of its successful influencer collaborations.

MS: "Definitely it is about how many people we reached in the result of each specific collaboration, the visibility numbers. But what we're trying to do is to shorten the path the consumers take from an influencer to exploring more of our destination's offerings"

HM: “Being a DMO that is doing general marketing of the area, we don’t have direct sales. We don’t have ticket sales, for example, that would help us to track the efficiency of our campaigns. That’s why we look at reactions and likes, as well as overall visibility”.

The influencers’ reach is seen by the DMO as an essential measure, especially when it comes to the international markets where the DMO’s primary goal is the growth of the awareness level regarding Tampere:

HM: "Internationally, we're focused on raising consumers' awareness of the destination. Not many people in the world know where Tampere is; we first need to make foreign travelers aware of our destination. By contrast, in the Finnish market, it is already the phase of action – everyone knows Tampere, we just need to get them here."

In some campaigns, a specific hashtag was seen as one of the measurement criteria. For example, for the *Hungry For Tampere* campaign, spreading the hashtag was one of its objectives. The most important assessment criteria in the case of this campaign was still visibility numbers.

HM: "The final goal behind the campaign was to get more customers to the restaurants, but it's impossible to track how many people actually visited restaurants in the result of the campaign. This is a long-term campaign, and the results will be visible probably in a couple of years. At the moment, visibility and reach are the main criteria for it."

The DMO also sees the number of overnight stays as the main assessment of its marketing activities, including influencer marketing.

HM: “Overnight stays can be seen as a measuring tool for press and influencer visits. The biggest challenge here is that we do not know when exactly these visits will result in trips to Tampere.”

MS: “We can hear from visitors that they came to Tampere just because they had read in a blog post about certain café or a museum, but it’s impossible to track systematically such influences. What our operations are measured by are over-

night stays in Tampere. We track this number as the ultimate result of our marketing activities.”

In addition to the overnight stays, the DMO’s marketing activities are oriented toward increasing the number of event goers and bringing clients to local businesses. The partnership network that the DMO has developed consists of about 200 companies in the hospitality area, and the organization aims at giving them visibility in its influencer marketing collaborations too:

HM: “We aim to include in the itinerary their products and services whenever they match the themes and interests of the influencers.”

Sometimes the companies involved in the itinerary receive a mention in a blog or a tag on an Instagram post or story as a result of the influencer’s visit. These mentions, tags and links to the companies’ websites, as well as the growing number of the website’s visitors are also taken into account while evaluating the influencer’s performance.

MS: “We don’t demand to tag the partners, but we may expect this happening if the influencer enjoyed their products or services. We saw this happening many times with restaurants, hotels and especially our local nature experiences providers. A good example can be of a lifestyle blogger from the US who mentioned one of the local design stores in Tampere and that resulted in the store website receiving 1 700 unique visitors from the US.”

While it is not easy to directly associate the overnight stays in the area of Tampere and the growing number of event goers and clients of the partnering companies with influencer marketing activities, the amount of questions the DMO receives on its social media channels is viewed by the DMO as a valid measurement tool and the influencer in question. For instance, in the case of the *Insta Camp*, many Instagram users contacted the DMO in the weeks following the campaign with questions about the location of specific places; the availability of direct flights to the area; and other activities associated with planning a trip to the region.

Besides questions from travelers, a growth of interest of other influencers towards the DMO is another important criteria of a successful collaboration. For example, after the success of

the aforementioned *Insta Camp*, over 20 influencers contacted the DMO suggesting a collaboration.

MS: “To get noticed by other influencers and get them interested in the opportunity to produce similar shots in our locations is part of our strategy too.”

The following figure (Figure 17) summarizes the measurement criteria applied by the DMO to its influencer marketing:

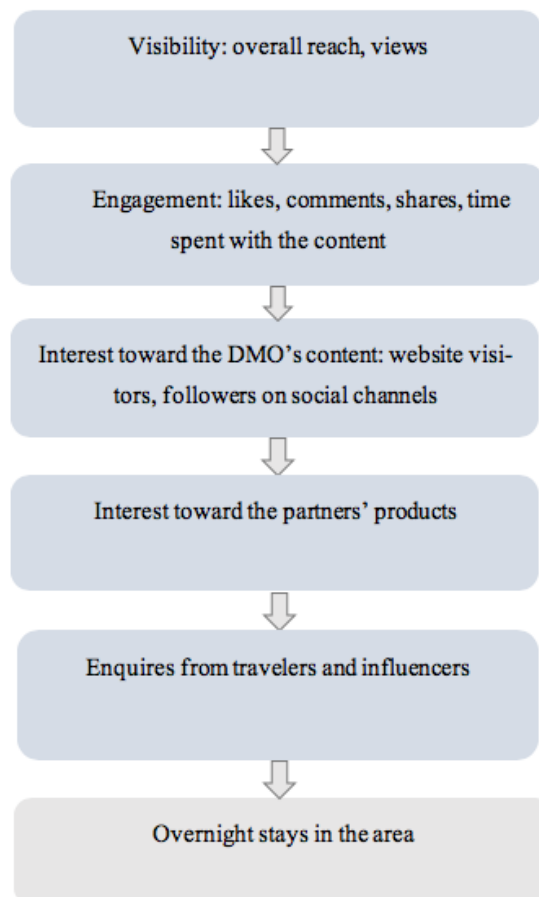


Figure 17: The measurement criteria applied by the DMO to influencer marketing

### 3.2. Managing influencer marketing

The previous chapter discussed the general measurement criteria the DMO applied to its influencer marketing activities. As evident from the findings, this criteria assesses the influencer's performance and does not address the role of the marketer. However, a successful out-

come of any influencer collaboration depends heavily on the marketers themselves. (IAB vaikuttajamarkkinoinnin opas, 2019)

To communicate effectively with influencers and to design an efficient marketing campaign, marketers need to realize that influencers are not advertising units or employees, but are strategic partners (Barker, 2019). By building strong relationships with them, a company can generate better results. The role of the manager in charge of influencer marketing is therefore paramount. By associating with content creators who have an influence over their destination target audiences, the influencer marketing manager is capable of developing and maintaining a controlling position over marketing (Baker, 2019).

At the studied DMO, the two employees in charge of the influencers control the whole entity. They plan, select influencers, define priorities for the collaboration, communicate the goals, negotiate the deliverables, and track the results. They also design itineraries for the invited content creators, and ensure that the programme of their visit is tailored to serve the needs of both the influencers in question and the DMO. The managers often act as local hosts and a source of insights.

This chapter will provide an overview of the most important functions of the influencer marketing managers at the DMO, and the role these responsibilities play in gaining successful results.

### **3.2.1. Selecting suitable influencers**

The people in charge of influencer marketing search for suitable content creators with desired target audiences and estimate their potential influence for the DMO's marketing objectives. Aided by the strategic messages of the destination, these employees decide whom to invite for a collaboration. While the managers have autonomy in making decisions themselves, they may consult colleagues regarding the selection of an influencer for a specific campaign:

HM: "After the main marketing themes are defined, we can fully trust these employees' competence in estimating the influencer's background and their ability to choose influencers that would efficiently spread the word about our destination."

According to Peltier (2018), how an influencer fits the brand is a more important factor than the number of his or her followers. Despite the emergence of numerous tools and software for

identifying appropriate influencers for a specific marketing campaign, only a destination representative can ultimately define a good match and evaluate if the influencer shares the values of the destination.

### **3.2.2. Being the contact person at the destination**

The interviewed DMO's managers agreed that there is no influencer marketing without the person managing it. Unlike in traditional advertising, influencer marketing cannot be planned without human resources reserved specifically for this process.

Being the person in contact with the DMO involves a wide range of functions from confirming the theme and dates of a visit to maintaining the connection both during and after the visit. This person is associated with the entire DMO for an influencer, and often with the whole destination. In practice, he or she can also act as the spokesperson of the destination, and therefore their influence may be extended to the final product of the collaboration. For example, they may be asked to provide information about the destination and comment on certain aspects of the local culture or Finnish culture in general. The influencers may also sometimes borrow perspectives on new concepts from their hosts.

MS: "When you show them around the city, you tell stories about places, and sometimes your words end up in Instagram posts captions or blog posts."

The influencer marketing manager at the DMO is also the person who meets bloggers personally, provides them with a brief and marketing materials, and often also participates in some parts of the itinerary.

MS: "You sometimes go to a sauna with them and keep a company in restaurants. Often you are referred to as a new local friend in some social media updates, [...] and you actually often even become a friend."

As mentioned earlier, the DMO does not use influencer agencies for its campaigns, and often coordinates the most significant part of the process on its own. Even in cases when suitable influencers are pre-selected or recommended for the DMO by PR partners and partnering organizations, the DMO takes care of the rest of the process by negotiating the outcomes, designing the itinerary and hosting the invited content creators whenever deemed appropriate.



In the case of destination marketing, it is necessary to provide influencers with an experience of a local host who could take the guests to relevant places and communicate everything that might be of interest for the required content for each place. The reason behind the destination being in charge of the itinerary and defining priorities is that the DMO has profound expertise in the destination offerings, and can, therefore, match them with the influencers' interests better than anyone else.

### **3.2.3. Defining priorities and deliverables**

Practitioners suggest that clear guidelines for both parties – a DMO and influencer – are essential to secure an efficient tracking of ROI (Bonilla, 2018).

The influencer marketing managers at the DMO decide the best proportion of the destination selling points for each particular influencer. For example, such topics as sauna and nature can be accented differently in the itinerary for a couple of Finnish bloggers from Helsinki and a YouTube star from the densely populated Tokyo. The managers also listen to the influencers and try to match their interests with the offered experience.

MS: “It's never a one-way order, it's about communicating each other's wants and needs. When everything is said loud it's easier to get better results.”

The question associated with defining priorities is to what extent the manager can influence the content.

The nature of this type of marketing is different from traditional advertising, which is defined by Kotler (1999) as “the use of any paid form of non-personal presentation and promotion of ideas, goods, services by an identified sponsor”. The best way for a marketer to communicate the expectations is by discussing the possibilities with the content creator and, after they have been taken into account, trust the influencer in bringing the desired perspectives in the most suitable way for both.

MS: “You might want to do a contract with an influencer and make sure that you get what you're paying for, [...] but with influencer marketing, you never know what kind of content you get. You cannot just make an order and have something predetermined to demand from the collaboration. It's about understanding their

particular channels and that they know what's best for their channels and their follower base."

Though the DMO manager is not in control of the content the influencer produces, the priorities is possible to define in advance. At Visit Tampere, this is most commonly worked out via determining the places for an influencer to visit and possibly review. The DMO offers all influencers an itinerary that is tailored to both parties' needs and objectives that are communicated and discussed in advance. In the light of this, the manager carefully selects the places and experiences for the influencer at the destination.

HM: "They most often go to the places that we suggest. [...] I think it's important that the DMO can define the accents and decide, what are the best places to go in each particular case. However, we cannot demand to review these places."

The extent of the influence that the DMO has over the content also depends on whether the collaboration is organic (unpaid) or a paid one. If the collaboration involves a fee, the DMO can communicate the goals and expect certain aspects to be covered and certain messages to be communicated in the piece of content it pays for. The role of the manager would then be to define these goals and ensure that the influencer delivers appropriate results:

MS: "Just paying for the collaboration is not enough. The outcome can be a lot less if our goals are not communicated and not met, so the important role of the manager is also in making sure in advance and afterwards that we get everything possible out of the collaboration, [...] that everything was discussed and delivered, and that the influencer understands as well as possible what we want to achieve."

The DMO expects the manager to define the minimum for each particular influencer to deliver, and then relies on the ability of the professional to do the rest.

Giving artistic freedom to influencers is essential. The influencing partners of a DMO can bring fresh and unexpected insights, and find something unique about the place that would especially appeal to their audiences. They can even broaden the DMO's view on their destination and define its new selling points for the market they represent.

### 3.2.4. Creating value for the influencer

A successful influencer marketing strategy relies heavily on the brand's ability to build meaningful relationships and create mutual value for influencers (Influencer Marketing Hub, 2018 b). This statement sheds light on the role a DMO's manager plays in the successful outcome of influencer collaborations. The manager should, therefore, be guided by two strategically important objectives: firstly, to find a good matching influencer for the destination; and secondly, to bring to him or her value other than a monetary reward.

Regardless of whether the collaboration is paid for or planned as visibility in lieu of an arranged trip and other benefits, the relevance of the content for the influencer is seen by the DMO as one of the main prerequisites for a successful collaboration. The destination and the itinerary should therefore be good fits for the influencer. One of the best examples of multiplying the influence by providing bloggers an opportunity to create value for their followers is the *Insta Camp* campaign.

HM: "There were both our and influencers' goals met. The campaign was an obvious match for them in terms of a great experience of Finland, good spirit and the fantastic content they were able to offer to their followers. All these factors created the ground for a successful outcome for the destination. I think together we succeeded to create a very positive image of Tampere as a nature destination."

The role of a manager is therefore to design a campaign that would bring value for the influencers and inspire them to produce great content. In the case of the above-mentioned *Insta Camp*, the participants collectively produced 26 posts instead of the 15 that had been previously agreed upon, and the two high quality videos that received over 10, 000 views each, were also an unplanned outcome.

An overall positive experience of the destination can also be considered in terms of its value for the influencer. The manager should ensure that the visit is both enjoyable and interesting for the invited content makers. He or she has to calculate the steps on the way to an overall pleasant and memorable experience that the influencers will take back with them to their homelands and share with their followers and peers.

MS: "We often get from our guests these "wow" comments with an intonation revealing they didn't expect the area to be so interesting, diverse and beautiful."

The manager should also keep in mind that even if the bloggers are professional travelers, a visit to the destination is always also their personal travel experience.

When the invited content creators have a good time, they often become nostalgic and can recall their travel memories long after the trip and share the content again. A good example of the destination becoming a special place for bloggers could be of a visit of an Instagramming couple that go by the handles @alex.mazurov and @anastasia.shuraeva to Tampere in 2016. The Instagrammers experienced the city both in the winter and in the summer, and kept re-sharing the pictures long after the trip (Figure 18).



Figure 18: Post from Tampere by @anastasia.shuraeva on Instagram.

### 3.2.5. Providing a positive interaction experience

The influencer's positive experience of the destination in general and the collaboration with the DMO in particular are crucial for good results. The manager in charge of bloggers visit should provide a good communication service as well as a positive socializing experience for influencers, especially if he or she meets them personally. This personal interaction experi-

ence can influence good results to a certain extent. The studied DMO proved the outcome to be better if the invited content creators are happy with the DMO's services and help.

MS: "The person in charge of the influencer marketing should not only analyze the influencers in question and their channels, but get along with them well. There are many social aspects associated with it [influencer marketing], and it's good to remember that even though the influencer has the responsibility to deliver, the quality can be many things."

Another possible outcome of the positive interaction experience is that the influencers may want to collaborate with the DMO again and may spread the word of the DMO as a good partner within their own network.

The atmosphere during the trip is also important in terms of the content, and the DMO's manager is often the one who is responsible for it as a local host.

MS: "When you spend time with the influencers, make them feel comfortable and easy here, it always shows in photos. I think it's the whole outcome that gives us a feeling that everything went great. The *Insta Camp* was, for example, a good example of successful collaboration. It felt good having them [the instagrammers] here and everyone had a good time. Then we could see it in the results when we got gorgeous photos that spreaded extensively."

Long-term influencer campaigns involving a group of influencers may sometimes require a manager to take on the role of a community manager – a person who creates a sense of community, either online or offline (Influencer Marketing Hub, 2018b). This is particularly important in keeping influencers feeling engaged and a sense of belonging to a community where they can discuss, plan and create an efficient campaign together with the marketer. When done right, the team members can motivate each other and produce better results. At Visit Tampere, this kind of community was formed for the *Hungry for Tampere* campaign. The five ambassadors and the DMO representatives had a private Facebook group as one of the communication tools and a place to discuss ideas, share the results, and to simply connect. The community also met offline at both related and non-related events and places.

### 3.3. Conclusions

This chapter will summarize the answers to the actual research questions of this study.

The case of Visit Tampere demonstrated how influencer marketing can be integrated into the marketing strategy to support the strategic marketing objectives of a DMO. Regardless of the methods used to contact and collaborate with influencers, the influencers' content always aims at promoting the key marketing messages of the destination. The core dimensions of the marketing strategy of the DMO are targeting and strategic positioning, and are reflected in the digital strategy. Thus, the destination receives systematic visibility in the target demographics through influencer marketing campaigns that are aimed at the distribution of selected strategic messages to specific markets.

An influencer for a DMO is someone who inspires followers to plan a trip to the destination that the DMO is promoting. To select a suitable influencer for a collaboration, destinations can consider factors such as the demographics of the audiences, the follower base, the relevance and quality of content, and the audience engagement of the influencer in question. The studied DMO allocates importance to all of them, while particularly underlining the follower base and audience engagement as the first things to pay attention to, especially with international content makers. The marketer, however, considers the numbers of followers to be of lesser significance as compared to the influencers' ability to drive the travel intent of their audiences and contribute to the creation of a positive image of the destination.

The measurement criteria of influencer activities should be bound to the marketing objectives of a specific DMO. At Visit Tampere, this is built around the goal of raising international awareness and increasing visit intentions domestically. Likes, comments, shares, views, reach, and the amount of time spent on the content are used to measure the effect of the communication done through the DMO's influencer campaigns; whereas enquires from customers, growing traffic to the DMO's website, and increasing the follower bases on the organization's social channels can be taken as valid measures of sales effect (Kotler 1999, 197) in the long process of place-buying. Ultimately, the goal behind all the marketing activities of the DMO is to achieve a growth in the number of overnight stays and to increase the number of clients

of local businesses in the tourism sector. However, there is no direct way to associate the increase in visits to the area with the effects of influencer marketing.

The role of a manager in the successful outcome of a destination's influencer marketing activities is strategically important and should not be underrated. This is because the marketer is the person who estimates the potential of the collaboration, connects the influencer with the destination, defines the priorities for the outcome, designs tailored itineraries, and provides communication support throughout the collaboration process. Thinking of the influencers' value and their positive experience of a destination are the key prerequisites for achieving good results of influencer marketing activities.

### **3.4. Discussion: towards more strategic influencer marketing**

Influencer marketing activities at the DMO are often bound to tactical actions due to the increasing amount of incoming collaboration enquires. The DMO has the potential to make influencer marketing more strategic.

HM: "It could be more strategic. We could be more proactive, plan and contact more, but at the same time, there is so much we have to react to in this field when collaboration opportunities present themselves."

MS: "We are trying to make influencer marketing activities more strategic, [...] but reacting to collaboration enquires is also a part of our influencer marketing strategy – we have to be adaptable, be able to react to short notice opportunities."

Good examples of strategic and carefully planned influencer campaigns are the *Insta Camp* and the *Hungry for Tampere*. Planning of more campaigns similar to these would require more personnel resources, while the employees involved with influencers activities at the DMO have other entities and projects to coordinate.

The influencer marketing practices at the DMO are characterized by an adaptive approach to strategy. The digital environment the influencer marketing is in is highly dynamic and subsequently requires the marketer to be responsive. The marketer demonstrates a high level of flexibility, being ready to take advantage of collaboration opportunities that are either unplanned or that do not primarily serve the main marketing messages but offer a chance to raise awareness among the target demographics through other themes like skateboarding and de-

sign. However, more planning would balance the overall flexibility and shape the process into a more strategic one.

MS: “It is [influencer marketing] going to a more strategic direction. At the same time, we could plan for our goals better and have a more unified idea of our collaborations throughout the year [...] We want in future think more precisely, what we want to achieve with influencer marketing and what influencers we want ourselves invite to market Tampere.”

Also, the term ‘influencer’ could be understood by the marketer in broader terms than just social media influencers. In addition to content creators, the DMO can consider involving other influencers such as Tampere advocates: industry experts and public opinion leaders, artists, musicians and other people known in the target demographics and followed by them. These people could connect to the destination’s main selling points and bring Tampere’s story further into their influence circles and audiences. According to Xu & Pratt (2018), even a local-born celebrity can be a destination’s unique selling point. Appointing a celebrity endorser can mark the distinctiveness of a destination. In the case of Tampere, these celebrities can be both of domestic influence (Finland’s renowned local music bands, actors, restaurant chefs) and have the potential of international ambassadorship (such as designers, sportsmen, artists, and brands with global sales).

Furthermore, influencer marketing could be better connected to both print and digital media campaigns, and influencers could be invited to other forms of collaboration like designing campaigns for Visit Tampere.

Next, influencer marketing could be oriented less toward reaching bigger numbers and more toward the ultimate goal behind it, which is bringing travelers to the region. In other words, it could be more sales-focused and aim at making the path of booking a trip to Tampere shorter and smoother. The managers could think about how to make flights, accommodation, and things to do easily available in fewer clicks from the Instagram picture or a blog post.

Influencers could also be better connected to the selling channels and the supply chain, to raise the selling power of the products, their ability to be purchased easier. This would also require an active position from the DMO’s partnering companies.



Moreover, the DMO could consider collaborating more often with influencers with smaller, niche audiences and marketing more specific products and experiences to them.

The benefit of each collaboration could also be multiplied if the companies involved in the campaigns engage with the influencers and their follower base by sending a complimentary comment like “Thanks for visiting our café, hope you enjoyed it!” or “Thanks for staying at our hotel, we’ll be glad to see you again”, and answering the followers’ questions and sharing the result of the collaboration on their own social media channels.

The DMO predominately measures the communication effect of its influencer campaigns and almost does not focus on the sales effect, whereas both are important for place marketing advertising (Kotler, 1999, 197). Since the DMO does not sell anything directly, the amount of enquires generated as a result of advertising can be viewed as a viable sales measuring tool.

The measurement criteria applied by the DMO is directed toward the objective of raising destination awareness. It is a relatively vague criterion that is difficult to measure and track. A destination could apply more trackable measurement to its campaigns – for example, it could enhance the use of trackable links and generate more traffic to the website via influencers.

Clicks from the influencers’ content to the DMO’s website and the growth of the DMO’s own social media channels are seen by the interviewed managers of less priority than the desired reach numbers in the target demographics. At the same time, the website traffic growth is one of the DMO’s main marketing objectives. Influencer marketing could be involved more often in achieving this goal along with SEO and social media campaigns, and collaborations could be designed with the feature of easy tracking of the relation between the website traffic growth and the influencer involved.

#### **4. Limitations and further research**

The scope of this research is limited, as it was conducted with only one DMO in one country. Having only one case for a study makes it difficult to generalize the findings. In particular, a study including several DMOs from Finland would allow for the generalization of the findings for the whole country, and to contrast different regions’ approaches to influencer marketing.

Comparing several DMOs at the regional level in Finland would also result in a more comprehensive coverage of successful strategies for influencer marketing in promoting destinations and provide a better understanding of how widely influencer marketing is embraced by Finnish DMOs, the extent to which it is integrated into their marketing strategies, and the objectives it serves. It would also allow the exploration of how active Finnish destinations are in searching for influencers, and which strategies of collaboration prove to be more successful and why. Furthermore, a study of several DMOs would allow for the creation of a pool of successful strategies for influencer marketing to be used for the promotion of Finland.

Next, the current study takes into account only the marketers' perspective and does not involve either the consumers or the influencers. The inclusion of consumers' insights would have resulted in a thorough investigation into questions of measurement. Moreover, a survey of the social media influencers' followers could have answered the questions of how they perceive the influencers' messages regarding the studied destination, and how these messages drive their travel intents. In other words, this would also allow for the evaluation of the marketer's measurement criteria to be applied to influencer collaborations in the future. For example, it would help to measure the awareness level of users in a particular campaign and look into how the content produced by specific influencers inspires travelers to picture themselves on the exact trip, having similar experiences.

Involving influencers in the study would certainly shed more light on the managerial aspect of influencer marketing. In particular, the influencers could evaluate the studied DMO's actions in a particular collaboration and share their expectations of managers at destinations in general. This would allow for a better understanding of what a successful influencer campaign for a destination involves from the perspective of content makers.

Therefore, this research suggests future studies to include the following factors of influencer marketing in destination promotion:

- A larger number of DMOs from Finland for a deeper understanding of Finnish destination marketing practices, or several DMOs from different countries to compare and contrast their approaches and objectives. Including several DMOs would allow to define a set of criteria destinations apply when gauging the effectiveness of their campaigns that could guide other destinations in their influencer marketing activities;

- Interviews with consumers to understand how they perceive the content produced by travel influencers and what determines the credibility and persuasiveness of their content; how consumers perceive a specific destination involved in a collaboration with a particular influencer; and the factors that drive their intent to plan a trip to the said place in the future. This would serve the purpose of comparing the efficiency of different influencer marketing strategies and different type of content for certain target groups;
- Interviews with influencers to gain an understanding of their expectations of partnerships with a DMO and their vision of successful collaborations.

Furthermore, the paid and earned visibility aspects could also be looked into, to especially determine the extent to which monetary compensation for content creators influences the quality of their content and its ability to fit the destination's promotional needs better. An additional point is how influencers being open about a paid collaboration with a particular destination influences the persuasiveness of their content and the followers' perceptions of this destination.

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## Appendix

### Appendix 1: Interview questions

Heli Jokela, Marketing Specialist

#### Block 1. How does Visit Tampere implement influencer marketing to promote the destination?

##### 1. Approaches to influencers identification

- 1.1. How would you define an social media influencer?
- 1.2. What does their influence mean in the case of Visit Tampere? (i.e. What is the objective of collaboration with influencers?)
- 1.3. How and where do you find influencers?
- 1.4. What are the most important factors you pay attention to before collaboration?
- 1.5. What international and domestic campaigns were a good example of successful influencer collaboration for Visit Tampere in 2018?
- 1.6. In your opinion, what predetermined the successful outcome of these campaigns?

##### 2. Approaches to measurement

- 2.1. What was the main *criteria* of success of the above mentioned campaigns? How do you measure the results?
- 2.2. Do you always apply same criteria to the measurement?
- 2.3. How do you track the return on investment in such campaigns?

#### Block 2. Managerial and strategic aspect of influencer marketing

##### Strategy

1. How strategic should be the process of influencer marketing?
2. Is influencer marketing part of Visit Tampere's marketing strategy? Does it support the strategic marketing objectives of the company?

3. What is the share of influencer marketing activities in proportion to other activities, both domestically and internationally?
4. Which strategies you applied to influencer marketing were most successful? Why?

## **Management**

5. What is the role of the manager in influencer marketing collaborations?
6. How would you define *influencer marketing management*?
7. To what extent the DMO's managers can and should influence the priorities in the content produced by an influencer?

## **Karoliina Lehtonen, Head of Marketing and Communications**

### **Block 1. How does Visit Tampere implement influencer marketing to promote their destinations.**

#### **1. Approaches to influencers identification**

- 1.1. How would you define a social media influencer?
- 1.2. What does their influence mean in case of Visit Tampere? (i.e. What is the objective of collaboration with influencers?)
- 1.3. How and where do you find influencers?
- 1.4. What are the most important factors you pay attention to before collaboration?
- 1.5. What international and domestic campaigns were a good example of successful influencer collaboration for VT in 2018?
- 1.6. In your opinion, what predetermined the successful outcome of these campaigns?

#### **2. Approaches to measurement**

- 2.1. What was the main *criteria* of success of the above mentioned campaigns? How do you measure the results?
- 2.2. Do you always apply same criteria to the measurement?
- 2.3. How do you track the return on investment in such campaigns?

### **Block 2. Managerial and strategic aspects of influencer marketing Strategy**

1. What were the main points of the DMO's marketing strategy in the year 2018, both in domestic and international markets?
2. What are the strategic marketing messages of the DMO?
3. How would you define the DMO's target groups, both domestic and international?
4. Is influencer marketing part of Visit Tampere's marketing strategy? Does it support its strategic marketing objectives, in what way?
5. How strategic should be the process of influencer marketing?
6. What's the share of influencer marketing activities in proportion to other activities, both domestically and internationally?
7. Which strategies you applied to influencer marketing were successful? Why?

## **Management**

8. What is the role of a manager in influencer marketing collaborations?
9. How would you define *influencer marketing management*?
10. To what extent the DMO's managers can and should influence the priorities in the content produced by an influencer?

## Appendix 2: Tables used for content observation

### 2.1. Content observation schedule

Month	Number of resources	Content types			
		Blog	Instagram	Facebook	Youtube
January	...	...	...	...	...
February	...	...	...	...	...
March	...	...	...	...	...
April	...	...	...	...	...
May	...	...	...	...	...
June	...	...	...	...	...
July	...	...	...	...	...
August	...	...	...	...	...
September	...	...	...	...	...
October	...	...	...	...	...
November	...	...	...	...	...
December	...	...	...	...	...

### 2.2. Annotations on Content Observation

Content type	Number of content pieces	Type of influencer based on following	Main topic of collaboration	Other topics covered	Audience engagement (likes, shares, comments)
Blogs					
...	...	...	...	...	...
...	...	...	...	...	...
Instagram					
...	...	...	...	...	...
...	...	...	...	...	...
Youtube					
...	...	...	...	...	...
...	...	...	...	...	...
Facebook					
...	...	...	...	...	...
...	...	...	...	...	...